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B.S.

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by
Michael P. Redmond
A.B., Princeton University, 1999
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ABSTRACT

This is a novel about a hack of a novelist who guides a fraud of a novelist around an allegorical version of the United States of America. It tests the limits of its readers' patience with irony and metafiction. Themes that are explored, mocked, and then explored again include belief, identity, reality, geography, the intersections of the aforementioned, and the comical futility of such exploration. Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.

I

“A satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could regulate at will the degree of his credulity.”

- Flan O'Brien, At Swim-Two-Birds

“The novel is the epic of an age in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem... The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God... This is why irony is the objectivity of the novel.”

- Georg Lukács, The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature

“Then Peter came and said to Him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother, the novelist, engage in blasphemies, hackneyed verse, and clichéd meta-fictional conceits against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’

“And Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you up to seven times, but you should forgive an author these sins seven times seventy times.’”

- Matthew 18:21, The #1 All-Time Bestseller

N.O.

We're sitting on the roof of a condemned warehouse on Jackson Avenue when I notice a distinct pattern to Milac's speech. He's probably been talking this way for days, but something about the scene makes me pay more attention, and his words hold a new, annoying resonance.

Our legs dangle over the edge, forty feet above the barbwire fence that we snuck under to get here and just a hundred yards away from the train yard that he insisted we get a better view of, even though it's well past midnight. Beyond the darkened rows of freightliners, four cargo ships glow in the dock's riverside lighting, the massive cranes perched above them, ready to resume their work of plucking the precious goods out of the floating bellies and strapping them onto the rolling chains of flatbed cars, sucking the material contents from all over the earth into the very center of America through this crescent smile of New Orleans, feeding the endless desires that haunt and delight us.¹

"We should get going," I speak into the silence, and although I've grown accustomed to Milac Rasselas not really answering me when I address him, his response at that moment seems particularly disjointed.

Beneath the ship

the black river flows:

no one sees the water.

¹ That haunt and delight us? I like that. Feeding desires through the crescent smile of New Orleans – not a bad image. Perhaps, young Michael, you're not the complete hack that Martin made you out to be.

“What the fuck was that?” I ask. The old² man is starting to freak me out. “Don’t tell me that was a... oh, shit... a haiku?”

I’ve put up with a lot from this guy in the last few weeks. We’ve been chased out of three states, been thrown out of four bars, trespassed six times, and gotten beaten up twice. Following this joker, this gray-haired adventurer, this self-proclaimed literary genius across the country as his driver and “cultural interpreter” (read: babysitter) is a job I took knowing full well that I’d have my limits tested, but I’ve promised myself that no matter what it might mean for my financial situation, my interpersonal relationships, or my future prospects of employment, I will quit – just flat out walk away – if either of two things happen: if I ever get shot at, or if Milac ever starts speaking exclusively in a form of seventeenth-century Japanese poetry.³

I mean, call me cowardly and call me boorish, but instant death and oblique Zen moments of pseudo-profundity are risks that I’d rather avoid. I don’t like guns being pointed at me. I don’t like the sight of guns. I don’t even like thinking about the damn things, so I certainly don’t want them being fired in my general direction. It’s just plain bad policy. Not to be confused with using sparsely-worded, three-line image descriptions to try to evoke deep philosophical understanding and ephemeral aesthetic bliss. That’s

² You haven’t called me old to my face, Michael. Why do you in your scribblings? You know I’m not old. At sixty-seven, I remain at the apex of my physical, intellectual, and sexual powers.

³ You don’t like my haiku? I take it back. You have no artistic sensibility, kid. You’re not just a hack. You’re a hack’s hack. A hopeless dabbler. A bland churner of warmed-over ideas.

just bad poetry.⁴ Okay, so it doesn't have to be, but it usually is. Even Bashō, who spent his life doing it, agonized over his failure, yet haiku remains a favorite formal playground of dilettantes and talented fifth-graders.⁵ At least Milac avoided the syllabic pedantry of forcing the five-seven-five, but even attempting the form so rife with cliché begs for a critical kick in the metaphorical teeth. Still, maybe I misheard him, maybe it was the accent, maybe he actually constructed a sentence that formed a coherent thought and eschewed the affectation of karmic enlightenment.

A boy can hope.

“What did you just say about the river and the ships?” I’m practically begging for a straight answer from him at this point, but his gaze has already turned to the rows of waiting railroad tracks.

Ribbons of steel
speed man through the seasons –
away from the earth.

Goddamn it all to hell, what else am I going to do? I guess this is one more quirk of his that I must tolerate. One more piece of shit I’ll shovel down into the old feedbag. I seem quite adept at setting limits for myself, minimal standards that conditions must

⁴ Oh, I get it. You’re being clever. Good for you.

⁵ Not to be confused with the postmodern self-deprecating travelogue mock-epic road novel, you unoriginal, ignorant, condescending fuck. As though your attempt to make literary hay out of quasi-critical thought were anything more than the predictably degenerate spawn of a decadent culture. Shit. Perhaps that sounds a bit too defensive.

meet, but I haven't yet figure out how to make these rigorous self-determinations of mine into anything more than comforting, self-delusional bluffs.

In other words, fuck.

By dawn, we've walked most of the way back to the car after being pursued from the rail yard by a pair of pit bulls and losing all the cash we had on us in an unwise gamble at "Club Behind the Eightball." Neither endeavor was my idea. I'll spare you Milac's neo-haiku on the subject of billiards.

Our car waits for us on Esplanade and our little hike takes us through half of the city, past mansions and projects, skyscrapers and hovels, showplaces and shacks right next to one another. The wealth and the misery, the grandeur and pain, the pleasure and the suffering all feel connected, contained on a single street, within a single block – at times, in some of the crumbling facades – both in a single structure, inseparable. The last few blocks lead us through the French Quarter, and the bars, the clubs, the live sex shows, and the faces that pour out of them, they hold the same longing as the city's architecture, but condensed to human form.⁶ The smell brings bile to the back of my throat.

The sidewalk and curbs of certain sections of Bourbon Street shine with the slick wetness of vomit and urine and half-digested grain alcohol. As the sun rises, the urban birds begin their daily scrounging, but Milac stops in front of one that didn't make it through the night. A gray ball of tattered feathers sits lifeless on the side of the road,

⁶ Are you trying to be ironic here or just melodramatic?

soaking in a puddle of filth. The creature doesn't look injured or mauled. It isn't the victim of a sudden or violent fate – it is simply dead.

*A common pigeon
twisted in the gutter –
soiled, still, smiling.*

This leaves me incredulous.

The empathic delight in his voice is just too much.

“What are you talking about? That bird isn't smiling,” I say. “First off, it's dead – dead things don't smile, and more importantly, it's a bird – birds have beaks, not lips – beaks can't smile, it's a physical impossibility!”

Milac breaks his visual connection with the avian corpse and looks at me. He rubs his hand along the grit of his unshaven chin and then points to the several living pigeons gathered on the street before he starts to walk again. The animate birds look just like their dead cousin, but they waddle through the excrement, the excretions, and the poison that felled their kin. Better than that, they peck at the bits of food that they spot in it – they're eating it – and the cooing noises that come from them, the wide, bright eyes, and tail-feather shakes leave no room for doubt.

They are all smiling.

I tell him that I-10 is faster, but Mr. Rasselas doesn't seem to be interested in seeing the wonders of the interstate highway system, so we're stuck on the old narrow roads, stoplights and all, as we head out of the city.

In a matter of minutes, the pavement is flanked on both sides by more water than soil. The spans of marsh stretch out to the horizon and the occasional clumps of flooded forest stand tenuously in place, as though the slightest breeze could end it all for them.

Milac stares at the trees, then squints to see the far-off refinery and the heavy pillars of chemical white that push into the sky from the industrial smokestacks, made small only by our distant perspective. He then looks back at the swamp remnants.

*Cypresses leaning
hauntingly westward,
to where we are headed.*

“They’re not a symbol, you know.” I’m not sure why I feel so surly. “They’re not mystic representations of the path of all mankind, not ancient fingers pointing towards an inevitable end or final truth. Those trees aren’t pointing us anywhere – they’re just trees, and they’re dying. The whole swamp is dying. I know that doesn’t sound tragic, but it’s an ecologic disaster – logging, pollution, fucking with the water tables – the swamps get brackish, the vegetation dies off, and everything washes into the Gulf. The next big hurricane hits just right and half of Louisiana’s going to disappear from the map. I saw a special about it on TV.”⁷

⁷ There it is. I’ve been waiting for it. I knew if I peaked inside your notebooks, your faith in the television would rear its Technicolor head. Even with your pose of jaded cynicism, your loud disdain of dogma and authority, your (admittedly wise) refusal to unconditionally credit any story from my mouth, you can’t pull away from the siren song of the passive knowledge box. How could your heart and mind not heed its relentless stream of warm and effortless beautiful information? You believer. You dupe.

*Heavy rains fall,
the landscapes change shape –
the road remains.*

“But think of how much will be lost! Endless habitat, countless species, a unique way of life, and possibly thousands upon thousands of human lives. That’s awful, that’s tragedy, that’s something that you should care about.”

This elicits no response other than a purse of the lips, a crinkle of the brow, and a resigned shrug. For the first time I realize that a gesture can be trite, because all the phrases that the gesture implies – *so what, that’s life, so it goes, etc.* – are trite. I also realize, with distinct displeasure, the reason these phrases have become trite: because they work – because they are so often true.⁸

I ignore him and keep driving.

⁸ But it’s not so much that clichés are true as it is that truth is cliché. Is not science the record of dead religions? When a belief is proven, when its acceptance is near universal, when it becomes – in a manner of speaking – trite, only then does the mighty belief deflate to the status of mere fact, of mundane truth. Knowledge is water thrown on gunpowder faith. A perception of truth cripples and deforms the spirit. Why quest for such a backhanded prize? It can’t help but disappoint.

I wonder how long it will take you to notice that I read your pages while you sleep. Will you ever glance back and see my notes in your text? And what is this text? A journal? A novel? A metaphysical account ledger of psychological expenses? What possible intent could you have for such a work? Who, beyond me, could you hope might be interested? And why on earth is it all in the present tense? Is that how you live? Is that how it happens? Hoping to form a visceral connection with the reader, are we? Please.

But I’m curious. Just how long have you been jotting down this meandering claptrap? Perhaps I should turn to the beginning...

N.Y.C.

Milac Rasselas hates first chapters. All introductions are, to him, loathsome. With books, as with people, he prefers a leap directly into the heart of the matter – no getting to know them, no setting the tone, no rhetorical balderdash or refined pussyfooting (yes, he really uses those words) – just a straight line of narrative into the action. Don't bore the audience with delicate foreplay – jump right in and start pumping, *in medias res*, even the ancient Greeks knew that. Milac *loves* the Greeks. Their pederasty doesn't even bother him – superfluous buggery, so to speak. No reason to rethink Western society's choice of philosophical forefathers. Of course not. The baby-molesters.⁹ This aspect of their behavior he considers uninteresting. *Interesting* is a huge word for Mr. Rasselas. He often loudly declares, "Give me interesting, or give me death!" and then quietly whispers that, dramatically speaking, he finds death quite interesting. God, I hate him.

But who cares what I hate? This story isn't about me (sweet mercy, nothing's more pretentious than a book about yourself), it's about him. And though he may be a prick, he is – fine, I'll say it – an *interesting* prick. So before I raise your impatience or Milac's ire, I'll get on with it.

⁹ Please, Michael. A fixation on the sexual fixations of others is an obvious sign of a limited mind. Besides, the dominant ancient Greek sexual fixation was not on infants as you imply – their fixation was on nearly pubescent boys, whereas the current American sexual fixation seems to concentrate on barely pubescent girls. A difference, I admit, but not a significant one.

The view from Martin's office is as incredible as it is narrow. He works in one of those spikes of glass that juts up from the skyline, nestled in with all the other spikes of glass, and in the tiny gap between the neighboring towers that surround his, I can barely make out the older city of brick and steel that seems to stretch out to the horizon. It doesn't help that the window, like the office, is only three feet wide, but Martin is only marginally powerful and this is Manhattan. You take what you can get.

Martin Readerly and I grew up together. We played on the same football teams, we dated the same girls, we even went to the same tiny east coast university together. So a few years back, when he got a job with Rederijkerskamer Management, one of the best literary agencies in New York (and thus in the country, if not the whole world), I nearly pissed my pants. Back then I had serious artistic aspirations, a seriously rigid moral aesthetic, and a seriously grandiose book¹⁰ planned. I was a schmuck, seriously. I was going to travel around America and capture the spirit of my generation. I was going to show not just how people lived but why they lived, not just what they believed but why they believed it, not just what systems they bought into but what those values cost them. I was going to write the great American novel, and then Martin was going to sell it. Simple, right?¹¹

To this end, I spent a couple years reading, a couple years wandering, a couple more drinking, another couple smoking, and in all that time zigzagging across the country, abusing my body, straining my friendships, supporting myself by whatever means necessary, I didn't write a damn thing. I tried, and I failed. Every time I hit a

¹⁰ If I believed in a god, I'd be praying to him, saying 'please don't let this be that book.'

¹¹ Your honesty here is suspect, Michael. How could anyone have ever been that naïve?

concept, an idea, or an inspiration, I soon came to realize that, Shit, it's already been done. And by the time it dawned on me that mine wasn't a mind of genius, that my notebook held no brilliance, that my prose betrayed no talent,¹² I had fucked up my life so thoroughly that the only people who'd still return my calls were Leah Kim D'nomder¹³ – my long-suffering, saintly, perpetual girlfriend since college – and Martin, who during this time had actually become a reasonably successful agent... hence the view.

So now, cringing and dirty, I've come back to the city, and I've just told Martin that I don't have a book for him, no masterpiece in the rough, not even an idea, and that I'm giving up on writing entirely,¹⁴ and now my only ambition is to find a job here in the New York, settle in with Leah, and maybe, someday, have a couple kids.

I look out his window, avoid his eye contact, and wait for his scorn, his anger, his disappointment.

"Fantastic!" he says and lets out a monstrous sigh. "I was terrified that you'd have some impenetrable tome for me to pretend to read. The last thing I need is another hack magnum opus – no offense – but as it is, you've brought me just what I do need: you!"

I stare at him, his lack of indignation fails to register in my brain, and his perfectly styled, voluminous black hair bounces slightly as he nods repeatedly. His hair has always been perfect. Even back in our football days, the helmets came off and his hair was still

¹² Ignore my last note. With this line, you've regain my trust. I couldn't agree more.

¹³ Michael Redmond & D'nomder, Leah K(c)im. Racecar. Rat star. Mad am I, Madam. Is this how you like to spend your spare time?

¹⁴ As Gore Vidal said, upon hearing of Truman Capote's death, "Good career move."

combed. Mine was a mess. Still is. I think about this instead, because although I know I'd been living a lie, I hadn't thought it utter fantasy. "You're not upset?"

"No. Of course not." He's still all smiles. "You say you need a job, and I've got a job that needs you."

"But all our talk about my book, all the great expectations you had, all the culturally vital sentiments that you saw in my work, aren't you shattered that they'll never be seen?"¹⁵

"Okay, Mike, I may have said a few things like that over the years," Martin almost laughs, "and you believed them because, at the time, you needed to believe them. But that doesn't mean I ever did. To me, they're nothing. Today, I need to know if you want to work for this agency."

"Doing what? Reading manuscripts? Finding authors that actually *can* write?"

He hesitates. "Yes, eventually... but first you have to work your way up. You don't think I started out here with my own office, do you? There's a lot of grunt work in this business. A lot of dues to pay before you get a shot. Understand?"

"I don't care. I'm broke. I need a job. My résumé isn't exactly impressive, but I'll do whatever it takes to make it in New York. I'm sick to death of wandering."

Martin pauses. "The job isn't actually in New York. But if you do this one thing for us, I can get you a real job here. This is your best shot at gainful employment..."

"What would I have to do?"

¹⁵ Is there a less sympathetic tragedy than the disappointment of the self-centered ambitions of an inept yet conceited would-be artist? In a word, no.

If failure is fire, then burn, baby, burn.

“Just show this guy around the country for a couple months. Travel the back roads, see the people, soak up the flavor, all the bullshit that you’ve been doing for the last few years.”

“But that’s what I’m trying to stop! I’m worn out. I quit. I can’t stand being on the road any more, and Leah’s been more than patient with me – if I head out again, there’s no way she’ll take me back.” I think I’m getting through to him, but he still has that pat, smug look on his face. “I had a reason for roaming when I started, but that’s gone now. It’s over. I’m beat.”¹⁶

“But you’ve been out there so long... I imagine you’re rather good at it.” He smiles and his hair bounces again. “So what’s another few weeks? Besides, Milac will probably get bored and call it quits in a matter of days.”

“Milac? The guy’s name is Milac?”

“Yes. Milac Rasselas.” Martin pulls three well-worn paperbacks from the shelf behind him and hands them to me. “The single greatest poet, novelist, and philosophical thinker that the nation of Nacirema has ever produced – he’s practically a demigod in his home country. Those are just three of his countless bestsellers there.”

“I’ve never heard of him.”

“No one has. That’s why he’s such a catch! Nacirema’s this tiny republic in central Asia that’s been virtually incommunicado with the world for almost a hundred years. They were peacefully¹⁷ absorbed by the Soviet Union, which kept them economically, politically, and culturally isolated for seven decades, but the surrounding

¹⁶ Are you still trying for clever? Honestly, just stop.

¹⁷ We put up valiant resistance for fifteen full minutes. Then we realized they had guns.

mountains offer such effective geographic isolation that they didn't even know they were under Communist repression until 1948. Yet it turns out they've got this massive literary tradition stretching back thousands of years, and the modern world is completely unaware of it. And check out those titles!" The volumes in my hand are nicely bound, but the print is in some bizarre language. I don't even recognize the alphabet.

"I can't read this."

"Neither can I. Neither can anyone other than a native Nacireman, but I've been told that they're absolutely breathtaking. And once we get them translated into English, they're going to be total sensations. Everyone thinks so, especially Milton." The Milton that Martin refers to is Milton Rederijkerskamer. *The Milton Rederijkerskamer*. Martin's boss. Or, more specifically, Martin's boss's boss's boss. The ancient and eccentric head and founder of Rederijkerskamer Management. Probably one of the most powerful men in literary publishing, certainly one of the richest, he's built his fortune and his reputation on taking chances that no one could have predicted and then pushing them through to success that no one would have believed.¹⁸ "Turns out that Milton himself found Milac during his most recent whirlwind, round-the-world trip. He convinced him to come to America to translate his own works, brought him back, sold us all on the idea, and generated so much buzz that houses have already started making offers. The only problem is Milac."

¹⁸ Milton, sweet Milton. The Western world's greatest leader since Caligula. The key to his success is his unparalleled depravity, Michael. It gives him uncanny insight into humanity. It also makes him deliciously exploitable. Had you been a bit smarter, you might have found this out for yourself. You couldn't ask for a better sugar daddy. The man would sell his own grandmother for a hand job. And to obtain more exotic favors, he'll believe almost anything. His net worth rests somewhere in the multi-million grandmother range, and his capacity to swallow absurdities is virtually limitless. This keeps him happy, and it keeps me in business.

“He won’t do the translations?”

“No.” Even Martin’s frown looks like a smile. “He keeps complaining that Nacireman doesn’t convert into American English smoothly. And now that he’s here, he won’t let anybody else translate his stuff either. Only *he* can fully *grasp* his work, but he refuses to do it until we let him write a new book, an American book, a book written in the English of his new audience so that his radiant genius isn’t dulled by the jarring transition from one *cultural-lingual milieu* into another.”

“So he needs to improve his English?”

“Oh, hell no, he’s completely fluent. His English is better than mine. He actually said *cultural-lingual milieu*.¹⁹ What he needs to learn is America. He needs *a story*, but he insists that it has to be an *American* story, so he needs to see the *real* America. Of course, we can’t send him out there alone. And he’s picky about the company he keeps, but when I described you, both Milac and the boss thought you’d be perfect.”

“That’s great and all, but I’m a bit tapped out...”

“Don’t worry about the expenses – Milton will cover them, and when you bring Milac back alive and ready to write, he’ll even throw in a tidy little bonus.” Then Martin mentions a figure. It happens to be the exact sum that I currently owe Leah. This figure is so small that I feel bad being bought with it, yet so large that I’m ashamed to have borrowed it from my girlfriend.²⁰ Let’s just say it’s enough.

¹⁹ Point of clarification: I was drunk at the time that I said this.

²⁰ Good to see your feeble attempt to corner the market on pathetic. Try harder.

When Martin first leads me into the conference room where Milac Rasselas sits, I'm fairly unimpressed. A smallish man with short gray hair, rough olive skin, and a wispy goatee, he quietly reads from a German edition of Goethe, while a half-eaten Danish rests on the table before him between a well-thumbed *Post* and an untouched *Times*. Odd. Then Milac begins to speak, and my perception completely changes.

His voice reverberates with a comforting depth, a mighty weight that seems to implore you to trust, to open, to talk. His thick accent hovers somewhere between Slavic and Pakistani, but his English is perfect, his enunciation precise. Even small talk sounds like a polished performance, each anecdote a reading, every sentence a poem. His practiced hesitations, his dramatic pauses lend everything he says an intensity, an uncertainty, a willingness to believe that the next thing out of his mouth will be either profound or hilarious, and a prejudice that if it's not one then it must be the other.²¹

"So, Michael, my new friend," Milac grabs me by the shoulder, "when will you lead me out of this rodent-squirring vestige of late capitalist industry and into the golden wonders of the American landscape?"

His word choice baffles me.²² "Anytime you want, Mr. Rasselas."

"Please, call me Milac. We are friends."²³ We begin our journey tomorrow."

²¹ Some people are easy to impress. And by some people, I mean you.

²² Is there anything even remotely complex that doesn't baffle you?

²³ I was still hopeful at this point. I thought that you might have been an ally in the cause, a willing coconspirator, an accomplice at the very least, and if things turned out right, perhaps much more. But I tell you, Michael, you are no such thing. The fun we've had and the damage we've done – it feels like I've had to fool you into all of it. You'd make a romp through a psychedelic bordello boring if I let you. Of course, I did not. I will not.

So you've started this chronicle at the very start of the journey... how innovative of you.

CT, RI, MA

We've got a long train ride to Boston ahead of us, and Milac insists we make it longer by taking the locals. More than different places, he wants to see different people. The morning's still dim, and though most people on this line commute the other direction, the meager crowd in our car excites Milac. He wants to talk to them, to feel their lives, to know their sorrows and share their dreams – to suckle at their proverbial²⁴ existential teats. I just want to sleep.

Last night wasn't pleasant. I told Leah Kim my new plan, and between thrown kitchen implements and sobs of rage, she calmly reminded me that I'd promised her that we'd finally get to be together. Why did I have to leave again? Why couldn't I be content? She tilted her head down, letting her hair fall into a long black, slightly messy wall in front of her face. (This means she's furious.) I then made the mistake of mentioning that at least I'd be able to pay her back.

"The money? You think I care about the money. After what you've put me through, the money is the least of what you owe me..." She then proceeded to list in painfully accurate (although not sadistically vivid) detail every individual time that I'd broken a promise to her, disappointed her, failed to remember her, or in some other way whole-heartedly let her down. Organized chronologically, this might have been bearable, but she sorted them alphabetically, and even X held six entries.²⁵ All together, the

Do I dare to hope that the telling improves as the travels commence? Let's see...

²⁴ Which proverb is it that links mammary glands to continental philosophy?

²⁴ Now you're trying too hard to court antipathy. Just let that happen naturally.

recitation took seven and a half hours, and at 4am she concluded that we couldn't sleep in the same bed that night – not even in the same room. And she lives in a studio.

So I got to the train station early.

Milac and I travel light. I've got a backpack, Milac has a duffle bag, and our only other encumbrance consists of a small, gray, fire-proof box that Milac lightly tosses onto the seat beside him. The handle clanks against the thin metal of the lid as it falls

"What's with the box?" I ask. I slide into the seats facing his.

"It holds the story. For safety." He smiles, but I'm still puzzled. "When I find the American story, it goes in there."

"To keep it safe?"²⁶

"To keep us safe. Stories are dangerous beasts." He gently pats the lock on the box. "The Nacireman story, as elucidated in my first verse masterpiece *The Granite Garden*, nearly wiped out an entire generation."²⁷

Obviously, this requires further explanation,²⁸ but Milac doesn't offer any, and I'm too tired to ask. I just shake my head, contort my body into a semi-prone position, and try to use my backpack as a pillow. As I slowly lose consciousness, Milac starts talking to the other passengers, and oddly, they seem anxious to respond. But even the novelty of friendly New Yorkers fails to keep my eyes open.

²⁶ Ask a stupid question...

²⁷ ...get a lame joke in reply.

²⁸ You took that seriously, Michael? I bet you're a lot of fun at parties.

I wake up when we reach New Haven. We switch to the Amtrak at this station, and Milac needs help carrying his luggage. I shoulder his duffle bag along with my backpack while he struggles with the new-found weight of his little metal box.²⁹

After we wait a short bit in the warm air, the new train arrives and we settle into the slightly nicer seats of the final car. When Milac puts the box down next to him, the cushion beneath it compresses entirely.

Milac resumes his badgering of the passengers, and I fall back to sleep. I drift in and out of my fitful slumber and catch quick glimpses of both the people Milac interrogates and the passing scenery. Neither holds much fascination for me. The people all seem educated, reasonable, decent, typical. Outside the views are of occasional rugged coastlines, obnoxiously nice houses, rocky forests, boarded industries of bygone eras, and once-rich fields, cultivated to the point of virtual desolation.³⁰

When the train pauses momentarily at the Mystic station, the doors open briefly and my nostrils suddenly fill with the scent of sea brine. Like smelling salts, this wakes me just in time to see a one-legged man walk in on an ivory peg leg. He wears a torn shooting-jacket with stout horn buttons and plenty of pockets, and the nautical stink hangs heavy about him. Filthy and disheveled, he looks to be a long-time traveler, yet he carries with him no baggage, save that in his soul, perhaps. He takes a seat across the aisle from me, and in short order Milac returns to our spot to pursue this human curiosity.

²⁹ Is every metafictional device of yours going to be based on such awful puns?

³⁰ Hyperbolize much?

This colorful stranger goes by the name of Mardi Redburn³¹, if you can believe that, and he and Milac instantly fall into conversation and trade their tales of far off lands, of natural cruelty, of human suffering and continual struggle. So deep is their talk that they don't notice when the train pulls into Westerly and a gangly man with a slender face, crisp black clothes, and a minister's collar steps onboard. They even fail to note his sitting down in the seat facing Mardi, where he quietly listens to them chat with a growing tension in his eyes like that of a coiling serpent.

When the exchange looses some of its steam and Milac moves the talk from particular events to ideas to metaphors to overarching beliefs, a far-off look covers the sailor's face. In a low, fearful voice, Mardi simply states that, "I believe that this world is an endless ocean, which we all sail across, never imagining the depths beneath us, until by our flailing, our pitiful efforts to stay afloat, our desperate pains to eek our sustenance from the very earth and sea, we ourselves bring up the mightiest of submarine creatures, that leviathan of the human will, that creative/destructive paradox that dwells within our hearts, which depending on our action, will either save or obliterate us."³²

Hearing this, the man in black – who it turns out, holds the title of Reverend Mandarin – points a bony finger at Mardi and calmly admonishes him at length. "Know you not the power of the Lord, and that all efforts at salvation are without Him futile? It is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up over the pit of hell, much

³¹ If you're going to invent a character and name him after Melville pieces, why not use his decent works? Call him Bartleby Confidence. Call him Omoo Encantadas.

³² Did you make this up, or did you steal it from a bad synopsis of Moby Dick?

as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell.”³³

Mardi looks up at the Reverend, as though this interjection comes as no surprise, and responds, “Yet the hellish torment of which I speak, you need not die to enjoy, for these reside inside of you, and in your freedom, you are already condemned.”

And the sermonizer retorts once more, as dispassionate as before, “Let no man think that in his freedom he be safe, that his struggles shall earn his salvation, that he might elude the far deeper agony to which all are at risk.”

“Prude.”

“Heathen.”

Back and forth they go like this, muttering insults of the most obscure kind, on and on for most of an hour. Milac can’t take his eyes off them – he seems almost giddy. He leans over to me and says, “This is delightful. The sharing of ideas, the exchange of differing views, be they personal, political, or metaphysical-theological.”³⁴ Beside him, his metal box has begun to crush the seat.

“I guess.” I’m not so sure, but it dawn on me that, delightful or not, it certainly is unique, as is Milac’s fascination with it. Perhaps this could be a subject for a story. Perhaps I’d find more subjects worth exploring on this trip. Perhaps this strange man from a foreign land can provide me with the perspective I’m missing. Perhaps I have one more shot at the title of author. I slowly pull my notebook from my bag and begin to scribble. Then I notice that no one else in the car pays any attention to these debaters.

³³ Quoting Jonathan Edwards, Michael? Please tell me this is a joke.

³⁴ You bastard! I would never make such half-witted statement! When you put words in my mouth, at least make me sound like I have the right number of chromosomes.

There must be a dozen other passengers in the car, but they couldn't care less that a preacher and a whaler wrangle over the nature of the human endeavor in front of them.

We pull into a stop; Mardi Redburn lifts himself from his seat, props himself up, and begins his slow stager off the car. Milac calls out to him, "Mardi, my friend, please come back – stay on with us to Boston and finish this amazing conversation."

Without breaking stride, he grumbles, "I prefer not to."

The Reverend, of course, seizes on this, "I'll stay with you until the very end, and beyond. You shan't see me hobbling off in disgrace, for where He goes, so do I." He then looks out the window and sees the station sign - Providence. "So long. This is my stop." Without another word, he strides off, and from the window, as the train pulls away, I spot Mardi and Rev. Mandarin walking into town together, holding hands.³⁵

With midday well underway, we final pull into Boston. The fire-proof box has grown so heavy that we have trouble getting it off the train, and it forces us to rent a handcart to carry it. I suggest we put it in a locker, but Milac insists that it come with us. We lug that cursed load all over half the city – around the Freedom Trail, through the neighborhoods, in the T, out past Harvard, and down to Fenway. And the entire area seems to be made of – to literally consist of – bricks and history.

At every turn, another bit greets us – a college, a university, a library, a museum, a monument, a landmark, a decrepit and dangerous ballpark that refuses to be torn down. Here a knowledge of a collective past, of a Founding and a Revolution, an origin-myth of Puritans, Patriots, Preachers, and Politics feels imprinted directly into the streets in such a

³⁵ You have a remarkable knack for making humor unfunny.

way that it holds the very edifice of the city together. Milac can sense this too as he pulls the increasingly burdened cart, but amidst the constant jingoistic imagery, the pictures of founding fathers hawking beer, and the thousands of tiny plastic American flags, he pauses in front of a bookstore. In the center of the window sits a book titled *Boston: The Story of America* with a cover photo of that same bookstore window complete with *Boston: The Story of America* sitting comfortably in the center.

“Fuck.” Milac stops the cart and begins to unlock the box. “It’s fake – the story – not fake like every story is fake, but fake because it’s just a story. They believed it two-hundred years ago, maybe even a hundred or fifty years ago, and they still say it today, but now nobody believes it! To them, it’s just a piece of culture, a dead tradition, a work of *art!*” The hatred in this word surprises me. “Not vital, not central, not *belief!* They don’t live by it!”³⁶ They just make a great show of claiming they do.” He opens it up, and the box is empty. I lift it and it’s just as light as it was that morning.

“That was one hell of a heavy allegory.”

“No, just melodramatic symbolism,” Milac yells, “but it gets the point across!”

³⁶ Why am I yelling? Do you have to try to make everything so numbingly emphatic? Do you think people will enjoy that more? Or is the sickness still deeper – is this actually the way you remembered this event? I know I said a few of these lines while we were in Boston, but I calmly whispered them over iced cappuccinos while watching the crowd from a sidewalk café.

I understand the misguided liberty you’re taking with my metal box, and the bookstore window display is almost cute in a not-quite-witty sort of way, but why must you try to paint me as raving lunatic? Is my voice not unique without amplification? Does this make you laugh? Does it make you feel better about yourself?

As dreary as the prospect may be, I now feel obliged to follow through this entire manuscript, if only to annotate and undermine the most obvious fictions...

N.Y.F.C.

New York City by bus can dishearten the most optimistic soul. The local busses are bad enough – slow, huge, stuck in the grid of traffic, stuck in a world that never seems to move, stuck in the knowledge that you can’t afford any of the luxuries, the whims, the eccentric delicacies of all variety so readily available in the city, because, Jesus, you can’t even afford cab fare. You envy the cabbies their mobility. But at least you’re in the mix, you’re living the life, you’re busy, you’re limited, and those limits keep you from realizing just how limited – if you can’t see to the end of the block, you’re lucky. The *Peter Pan Trailways* bus offers no such mercy. Coming into the city, the skyline³⁷ rises up to greet you at least half an hour out on even the cloudiest day, with no other purpose than to show you all that you don’t have, never have had, never will have. So you sit there on your dirt-cheap mass transit without any driving to distract you, your only companion asleep, and you contemplate the giant buildings that you can’t really see when you’re in them, and you decide they each represent a different choice you’ve made, a poor one, a road not taken, an opportunity that will never be yours again. At least, that’s what I do. The rain doesn’t help.³⁸

After freaking out on the streets of Boston, locking himself in a hotel room, demanding that I book tickets on the next bus back (“No more trains, goddamnit, this

³⁷ Is the skyline coming into the city, Michael? Of course I know what you mean. You mean, “As you come into the city, the skyline...,” so why don’t you say that? Did you feel that misusing the present progressive in this case lends a certain kinetic intimacy to the writing? It doesn’t. It just makes you look dumb. Don’t get me started on your comma usage. Does pointing these things out you make me feel pedantic? No. It makes me feel smarter than you. Which I am.

³⁸ There was no rain, and you know it.

journey we start over right!”), and drinking himself into the next afternoon, Milac enjoys a restful trip in a tiny seat. When we reach the Port Authority, it seems almost cruel to wake him. So I do. Gladly. “We’re back, Milac. Where do you want to go now?”

“Get a cab.”

Milac gives the cabbie an address in Chelsea, and we slowly head down through the early evening traffic. “Your place?” I ask.

“A friend’s.”

We sit back in silence. Milac tries to talk with the driver but doesn’t have the energy to yell through the bullet-proof partition, so he turns his focus on me.

“You look troubled, Michael.”

I am. “It’s nothing. Just worried about my girlfriend.”

“She doesn’t want you to do this?”

“No.”

“What’s her name?”

“Leah Kim D’nomder.” This always takes some explanation. “She’s Jewish-French-Korean.”

“That a good mix?”

“The best. She’s gorgeous.”

“I’m sorry. That’s too bad.”

“That she’s beautiful?”

“The beauty always hurts the most. Aesthetics and masochism. One in the same.” He shakes his head, and I just look at him.

“Are you sure *you* want to do this?” I ask. “I’ve been around this country a few times myself, and it’s not all shits and giggles.”

“I need to do this, Michael. My art demands that I grasp the American story.”³⁹

“Okay, Milac, but just for the record, you won’t find anything in America that you can’t find in New York. This city has everything.”

“I know this.” Milac looks disgusted. “Not just from America, but everything in the world. The other day I was walking through Midtown and I saw a Nacireman deli. Do you know where you can’t find a Nacireman deli? That’s right, Nacirema. Not a single deli in our entire nation. No one would dare to sell our treasured ethnic delicacies by the pound. I was horrified. Mostly because I didn’t have any cash on me. New York isn’t a nation, it isn’t even a city, it’s a Faustian bargain of a baroque metropolis where everything is wanted for nothing is dear. But the heart of a people, the story of a people, the story they believe, it isn’t about what they have or what they can get, it’s about what they need, it’s about what they lack.”

“Fair enough.”

“Besides,” he grins slyly, “I’ve wanted to see America since WWII.”

“Nacirema was in World War II?”

“Yes. For three days, right at the end. I was very young, but I remember. A unit of paratroopers landed in our fields, asked us if we were occupied, we said ‘we are now,’ they asked who we supported, and we said ‘the winners.’ They laughed. Later we found out they were Russians, and we were a part of their big new mega-state, their Soviet Union.” His smile slowly fades. “It took a few years for us to learn all the details.”

³⁹ I still can’t believe this line didn’t set off your bullshit alarm. Do you even have a bullshit alarm? A gag reflex? Such gullibility begs to be pushed to its limits.

The cab stops in front of an unimpressive-looking apartment building, but once we get past the doorman, who nods to Milac and lets us through, the interior is nothing but marble floors and gold filigree. The spacious elevator offers a finely embroidered settee and an elaborate fresh floral arrangement, and the uniformed operator doesn't even ask when he sees Milac, but he closes the door behind us and sets the dial to the penthouse. I have to ask. "Who lives on the top floor of a place like this?"

"The top three floors, actually," Milac replies. "I think you'll recognize him."

The elevator lets out into a hallway that has only one door, and when it opens, we walk into the most disgustingly opulent sitting room that I have ever seen. From the twenty foot windows, natural light pours in on the silks, tapestries, paintings, sculpture, and exquisitely appointed furniture, and in the midst of this splendor, a large old man with a mane of silver hair sits reading a book and taking hefty gulps of a martini. He looks exactly like his press photos, only much, much drunker. Milton Rederijkerskamer stands to greet us, shakes my hand, and kisses Milac with a passion that edges towards violent. Milac heads straight to the bar to mix another round, and Milton turns to me.

"So you're the boy who'll be taking Milac off our hands for a while, teaching him firsthand about America. I must tell you, when I found Milac in Constantinople, he was all the rage there amongst the intelligentsia. The absolute doll of the scene. At parties, at readings, at coffeehouses and dance clubs and even Turkish baths, especially at the baths, he was everywhere,⁴⁰ and even when he wasn't, everyone had heard of him, everyone loved him, everyone knew his amazing writing, although I'm not sure any had read it."

"I read some of my poems to you," Milac says, brining three fresh martinis.

⁴⁰ I was everywhere Milton was, usually the bathhouses. To stalk your prey, you must lurk where he feeds. Never has there been such a successful pouncing.

“Yes, you did. And they were captivating. I couldn’t understand a word of it – no one could, since he read them in Nacireman – but the mere sound of them spoke volumes. I knew I had to have him. I signed him up on the spot. It took a bit more convincing to get him to New York, and now even this isn’t enough for him.”⁴¹

“You know I must see America.”

“Ah, yes. The City has everything for you, and so it needs everything from you. It’s a poverty of riches, it has all the ingredients, so any story can be made out of it, which is why so many artists have. New York is a whole world – it’s any number of worlds. But it’s not America. America is something more. Something different. Something special. It still holds a certain rustic charm and fascination. I don’t know what America is. I’ve lived in New York all my life.”⁴²

“But you’ve been outside the city,” I say. Milton drops a condescending chuckle.

“I’ve seen every spot on the globe a thousand times, but I always seem to bring The City with me. How can I really leave it? How do you get outside yourself?”

“That,” Milac interjects, “is where I come in.”

The conversation lulls after that. When we finish our second drinks, I blithely wait for the pouring of another round without noticing the growing darkness outside the window or Milac’s increasingly obvious hints that I should leave. He and Milton already snuggle on a couch, but it takes near-total bluntness to win them some privacy.⁴³

⁴¹ After a couple months of luxury, even Manhattan can get dreary. And my welcome was wearing thin. And Milton was always saying the most incredibly boring things.

⁴² See what I mean.

⁴³ I would have said something sooner, but Milton was hoping you’d stay. At least to watch.

“Michael,” Milac says, in an urgent wink-nudge tone, “shouldn’t you try to make up with Leah? Why not go over there? You can meet me here tomorrow morning.”

“Of course. Sure. No problem,” I stammer, standing up. I let myself out.

Leah lives in the Village, but I’m not sure how well I’ll be received, so I take my time and make it a long walk, all the time thinking about what I’ll say. On the way, I get her flowers, and I pick up dinner from a Chinese place by NYU that I know she likes. Peace offerings, I guess.

She lets me in – a good start – and the flowers almost get a sad smile. We eat the food in near silence, and I pathetically gawk at her while she pointedly refuses to look at me. Whenever the hush becomes too unbearable, I sip from my glass of wine – the decent red that I didn’t have the common courtesy to pick up on the way there, but of which Leah always has an ample supply in her closet. She was half-way through her first bottle when I showed up.⁴⁴

“How long will you be gone?” she finally asks.

“Just a few weeks, I promise. Two months, tops. Don’t worry, you won’t even have time to miss me before I get back, and I’ll call you every night.”

“Don’t bother.”

This shuts me up like a punch to the junk.⁴⁵

“Just call when you know that you’re coming back.”

I exhale.

⁴⁴ You’ve driven the poor girl to drink. You think it’s your inconsistency that does it, but it’s really your conversation.

⁴⁵ As much as I enjoy this euphemism, is this the appropriate time for it? Think tone.

“To stay. For real this time.” She slowly shakes her head and takes a drink. “I don’t know why I keep pinning my hopes on you.”

Honestly, I don’t know why she does either. But I fail to mention this, and the rest of the meal passes without a word.

As I move the dishes to the sink, she moves to the couch and turns the stereo on softly. I open another bottle of her wine and join her on the couch. She refills her glass and turns the lights down. We gently begin to talk, but neither one of us feels entirely engaged, committed to the conversation. The unsaid killers can’t help but lord over those pleasantries we manage to get out.

She never says that we’ll be okay when this is all over. The bitch.

I never summon the courage to ask. What an asshole.

Eventually, the emotions, the habit, the music and the alcohol all conspire to get us kissing again, but I can’t tell if Leah is just being kind. Softer than usual, she feels pliant, almost docile, while her normal demeanor is energetic, bordering on ferocious. Kiss by kiss and piece by piece, our clothes come off, and the gnawing pain in my stomach tells me she’s doing this exclusively for my benefit, but this doesn’t bother me. I’m used to it. I have developed a taste for slow, merciful pity fucks. What feels like shattered glass pushing through my small intestine is the fear that this might be my last one.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Excellent job of reducing your one potential source of emotional gravitas to a concern over the physiological urges of a hamster. Do what you like, but don’t expect anyone else to care about the fate of a relationship already so far down the crapper.

The next morning, Milac is waiting for me under the awning outside Milton's building. "He had an early meeting," Milac tells me, "and he didn't want to leave me alone in his place." This should probably worry me, but Milac immediately hands me the ultimate talisman of reassurance: a gold-hued piece of rectangular plastic, imprinted with the name, account number and magnetic strip linked indirectly to the ample coffers of one Rederijkerskamer Management Inc.

I may not have a contract. I may not have an office or a cubicle or a health plan or the status of an actual employee, but with Milac in tow, I do have the corporate credit card, and that I can only hope presumes a certain level of confidence.

As if only intending to undermine this thought, Milac adds that, "Milton is not a man who minds throwing good money after bad."

The rain still hasn't let up any from yesterday. The gray is universal, and even the steel and glass buildings that usually sparkle just wallow in their heavy wetness. The dank is general all over New York,⁴⁷ so to speak. And right now, there's only one thing more depressing than being in this city – leaving it.

⁴⁷ This paralleling of the final words of Joyce's *The Dead* fails to win you points for either substance or intelligence. Instead, it makes you sound just as histrionic and lacking in perspective as that crazy old fart monger. You make superb use of the word dank, however.

So we're thirty pages into your little adventure and we still haven't gotten out of New York? If nothing else, you're a master of narrative pacing, Michael...

“I said no more trains!” Milac yells⁴⁸ in front of the New Jersey Transit ticket machine at Penn Station. “Those mechanical snakes may once have slid along the duel iron spines of American commerce and culture, but no more, it’s a lie. Those limited vestiges of a recalcitrant past misled me once, but never again! A century ago, perhaps, but today this is not a train nation.”

“You’re right,” I whisper, trying to bring his volume back down. “It’s a car nation, but in order to get to the car, you need the train. Don’t worry. It’s a short trip.”

When we step off the train thirty minutes later at the Metuchen rail-stop, the rain still wearily falls from the skies. Neither one of us brought an umbrella, and despite the wind, the warmth of the day precludes jackets, so we just let ourselves get wet as we walk into town.

“Where are we going?” Milac asks.

“Not far now,” I reply and keep walking.

A few hundred yards and three turns later, I spot the lot with its worn wooden sign that reads “Sancho (Pay-in-Advance) Parking.” We slowly approach the open gate in the rusted, chain-link fence. Standing between a massive pile of dumped gravel and the stripped frame of an El Camino on cinder blocks, the old girl waits for us patiently. Her sleek contours push up through the wide blue tarp that guards her precious shine.

⁴⁸ Do you have sensitive ears? I only yell during sex.

When we get beside her, I caress her fender through the heavy plastic covering and whisper, “Daddy’s home, baby. Did you miss me?”

Milac helps me pull off the cover, but as I fold it up and toss it in the trunk, I notice that he’s staring at the car. His eyes run along the sharp angles of pressed steel, the startling abundance of chrome, the bulbous curve of the ultramodern windshield, the oversized tires and the original orange-red factory finish that could only be at home on a lone desert highway.⁴⁹

“What *is* that thing?” A bewildered nausea seems to creep into his face. He isn’t the first to have had this reaction.

“That’s a decade of American automotive art condensed into one car. That’s the ultimate synthesis of muscle and sport. That’s the incomparable ’77 Mancha Rosinante!”

Milac remains unimpressed. “It is a piece of shit. That’s what it is.” He obviously doesn’t recognize the name.

“Hey now, Milac, let’s not say things we can’t take back. This car has more to it than just metal and paint. This car has a story. In 1975, as part of its domestic industry program, the Mexican government created the Mancha Motor Company to design and build a Mexican sports car for the Mexican people. Not intended for export, the mandate called for every teenager gear-head’s wet dream, flashy and powerful, an object of national pride. Lacking automotive experience, and free from the constraints of making a product that people would actually want to buy, the team from Mancha set to work dissecting all the most alluring aspects of their favorite American cars – from Corvettes

⁴⁹ This description doesn’t begin to do justice to your car’s awfulness. A twisted stew of non-connecting lines and deteriorating materials, the thing looked like it had been designed by M.C. Escher and maintained by a junior high shop class. Perhaps the worst of all possible vehicle choices.

to Mustangs to Camaros to GTOs – and enhancing them. They must have secretly recruited a couple designers that had worked on each of the originals to help them piece it all together because the final product contained design flaws that only Detroit of the mid-70s could think up. And two years later, when this unholy amalgamation of the most impractical automobiles ever conceived debuted, it was without a doubt the worst-built car known to man. It far surpassed all its influences, it exceeded the sum of all its antecedent parts, it made the improbable impossible and the whimsical absurd – all at a price that guaranteed no one could afford it. It's unreliable, handles poorly, chugs gas, burns oil, and couldn't be more dangerous. But still, it does go fast, and just as importantly, it is *my* car."

"That story's not good enough. The car is still a piece of shit. The Soviets built better cars than this. The Red Army, when they stopped using a tank, would strip it of the gun and armor and everything valuable, and sell them to us for transportation, and those were better cars than this."

"You just don't understand. The '77 Mancha Rosinante is the only Mancha Rosinante. Not only did Rosinantes cease production after less than a year, but Mancha Motors folded altogether, mostly because of the phenomenal lack of success of the Rosinante. It's more than a car – it's a legend, it's a ghost, it's the only one left of its kind. Less than five hundred came off the assembly line before they realized their colossal mistake, and of those, only twelve ever made it north of the Rio Grande. Seven were lost in crashes, three were scrapped for junk, one was washed off a cliff in Northern California during a freakishly strong rain storm – but this one – this one was confiscated from a low-level drug dealer in 1991 and after failing to attract a single bid at the

subsequent police auction, it sat in a Kansas City impound lot for eight long years before I spotted it and broke it loose by passing a twenty to the guard. Sure, it's got about three hundred thousand on the odometer, but those are mostly highway miles."

"Okay, maybe the story improves, but if you like this car so much, why did you leave it in this dump?"

"This is where I ran out of gas."

"You mean...?"

"Yeah, but there's a gas station a couple blocks that way, so we don't have to push it far."

Wet and warm from straining to move the car in the drizzle, we finally bring it to a halt at the corner station, and I start filling the tank. Milac leans against the pump and wipes the sweat from his face.

"I'm starving. Where can we get a drink?"

Next to the station, a Dairy Queen sits with its giant red pointed oval sign emblazoned with those unforgettable DQ initials. Here's a piece of Americana that Milac needs to experience sooner or later. "Why don't we get lunch at Dairy Queen?"

"Do they sell booze?"

I shake my head. "Just fried food and ice-cream."

"Then we eat somewhere else. Somewhere with booze."

"But DQ is a part of America. You find it everywhere, both as the genuine article and in endless imitations. This whole place doesn't make sense without it. I love DQ."

"Yeah, alright already, I think they get the reference."⁵⁰

⁵⁰ I would have said this if we'd had this conversation. Your awareness shocks me.

“Shut up,” I snip. “It’ll be important later.”

“It’s never important enough to be this fucking obvious.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Yes. But first I need a drink.”

With the gas tank full and the oil checked, I turn the key and the old girl rumbles to life, happy to have someone inside of her again.⁵¹ It doesn’t take us long to find a bar and grill, one that looks like every other bar and grill in the same way that Metuchen looks like every other town. Superficially nice, but genuinely dirty, it must be a night place because the lunch crowd consists of us, a lady in heavy makeup tending the bar, and a solitary drunk that’s been flirting with her all morning.

She looks annoyed when I ask for a menu but perks up a bit when Milac orders four shots of whiskey as an appetizer.⁵² Sitting at the bar, sipping my coke, I watch him down one after the other, thankful that he didn’t ask me to join him. “Perhaps you should know,” he says, “car travel makes me nervous.” He orders another two drinks.

As we eat stale-bread sandwiches and off-brand chips, Milac keeps drinking and grows more talkative. He wants to know where we’re headed, and I say that it’s up to him. “Show me everything there is to see. The best and the worst.”

“There’s not much of that in Jersey. It’s a chronically mediocre state.”

“What about the Jersey shore that I’ve heard so much about?” he asks.

“Pleasant enough, but it lacks the white sand and blue waters of Florida.”

“And Atlantic City?”

⁵¹ Subtly equating driving to sex, are we? Leave that to the car commercials.

⁵² So now I’m a raging alcoholic? Nice. You sure know how to treat a subject lightly.

I shake my head. “A poor man’s Vegas. Or a rich man’s riverboat. Not worth the drive through the pine barrens.”

“Then what is the one thing most typically Jersey?”

“Suburbs. It’s a state full of suburbs. But you’re in one right now, and they don’t vary much from town to town, or from state to state for that matter. Throughout this trip, you’ll see countless Metuchens in every corner of the country.”

“So there’s nothing unique in New Jersey?” Milac looks disgusted. “Is there not a single thing in the whole state that you can’t find a better example of somewhere else?”

“I guess you could say that.”

“Is it true of the people, also? In my short time in New York, it seemed that every remotely interesting or marginally beautiful person in New Jersey had escaped to the city, never to return.”

Just then I notice that, just a few feet away, the bartender and the drunk listen to our conversation, quietly growing more offended by the second. Finally, the bartender speaks up. “You’re both full of shit, you know. Lots of people come back.” She’s pissed off, and her deep wrinkles accentuate the scowl on what was once a stunning face. “I mean, I came back. Sure, I moved to the city when I was eighteen – and I spent fifteen years there – but I still came home, back to Jersey.”

“Why?” Milac asks with nothing but sincerity in his voice. “Because your looks gave out? Because you couldn’t hack the club scene? Or because the city only wanted you when you were young enough to enjoy one another?” I can’t tell if Milac is drunk, oblivious, cruel, or all three, but in the corners of the bartender’s time-ravaged eyes, clear wetness begins to form.

“No, you little prick. I came back here because this is my home. This is where I wanted to start a family.”

“And have you started a family?” He’s curious. Genuinely curious.

A couple tears make a dash for her chin, and she whispers, “Not yet.”

For a second I think he’s going to press this farther, but then he sees that she’s crying. “Of course, yes.” He looks away. “Best of luck to you.”⁵³

This sends her running back to the kitchen, and at that, the drunk stands up off his barstool and takes three unsteady steps towards us. Standing, he looks to be about 6’5”, 250 lbs, so his intoxication worries me more than it assures me. This guy could crush me just by falling, and he doesn’t seem too happy with us. “What the fuck do you two think you’re doing? You can make fun of the Shore, you can give Jersey shit, and even mock Jersey girls. But when you start messing with our bartenders, you’re just asking for trouble.”

“We were just leaving,” I say, as I throw a couple bills on the bar and pull Milac out the door with me. But our new friend doesn’t want to give up that easily. He follows us out to the car, badgering us, calling us cowards, telling us we’re pussies, and accusing us of several varieties of sexual deviance. Milac finds these insults fascinating, but I herd him into the passenger seat and do my best to ignore the drunk. However, the behemoth stands between me and the other door, and now he starts insulting the car.

“What did you just say?” I ask.

⁵³ I can’t believe how badly you’ve botched this story. Was the real version to complex for you? You’ve made me out to be an obvious and insensitive lout when in fact I was a subtle and insensitive lout. I spoke to the bartender caringly. I listened to her fears. I pandered to her most glaring insecurities. And then I seduced her in the bathroom while she pretended to be in the kitchen. That’s why the jealous drunk chased us out of there, you idiot.

“I said your car’s got a dent in it?”

“Where?” I can be pretty stupid at times.

“Right there,” he says, and kicks the left rear panel, bending it in three inches.

“Son of a bitch!” Without thinking, I swing at him and hit his chest. This does absolutely nothing, but the impact of *his* fist on the side of my head sends my vision swimming, and I crumple towards the ground. The last thing I see before my mind goes blank is Milac pulling the tire iron⁵⁴ out of the back seat.

⁵⁴ A tire iron? What am I, a street punk? Why don’t you have me just pull out a glock and cap his ass? Must you make everything into a train wreck, even if it means twisting your one potentially fascinating character (read: me) into the caricature of a terror?

Tell the readers what really happened. Show them how I talked the beast down from his frenzy. Go through step by step my explanation of my emotional conversation with the bartender in the bathroom. Give the details of how I convinced him that the moaning he heard was actually her sobs of joy and sighs of relief at finally be able to come to terms with hidden issues. Tell how, even if he didn’t fully believe the story, it confused him long enough for us to get into the car.

Trust me, Michael. That will be much more entertaining...

II

“I approach deep problems like cold baths: quick into them and quickly out again. That one does not get to the depths that way, not deep enough down, is the superstition of those afraid of the water, the enemies of cold water; they speak without experience. The freezing water makes one swift.”

- Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science

“‘They say that when good Americans die they go to Paris.’
“‘Indeed? And when bad Americans die, where do they go?’
“‘Oh, they go to America.’”

- Oscar Wilde, A Woman of No Importance

“Brevity... wit.”⁵⁵

- Marcel P. Roust, An Excessively Long Book

⁵⁵ Admit it, you just made this up to get out of reading several thousand pages of purportedly seminal literature. Come to think of it, that’s not a bad approach.

D.C.

The squeal of semi-bald tires swerving at ninety brings me back to the conscious world, but I'm not sure I want to be awake. Curled up in the passenger seat of the Rosinante, I see that Milac is driving, the world is blurry, and the tire iron, slightly bloody, is at my feet. "Is that a tooth?" I ask, staring at the floor mat.

"You don't want to know," Milac replies, all business.

I look out the window, shake my head, and try to clear the fog of concussion, the mental moss that my rolling head has nonetheless gathered. "What happened?"

"He slipped." He doesn't smile.

"Where are we?"

"How the hell should I know? I just started driving."

I make him stop at the next rest area. I take over driving, and although he won't give me any details, Milac seems to be anxious to leave the state.

We keep going south on the interstate. Suddenly,⁵⁶ the road dips down into the earth and we're in a tunnel passing beneath a harbor. Milac's head bounces back and forth as he tries to watch the endless lines of florescent lights that stream past us on the walls of both sides. The smile plastered across his face reads confusion and delight. "Never driven through a tunnel before?" I ask.

He shakes his head, almost giggling. "It's like a *Battlestar Galactica* launch."

"You had *Battlestar Galactica* in Nacirema?"

⁵⁶ This is your recipe for a good story – lots of *suddenlys*.

“Two years ago, *Battlestar Galactica* was our National Television’s biggest hit.”

Wow, I think to myself. Just wow.⁵⁷

When the tunnel spits us out on the road above Baltimore, Milac spots the shipping docks even before he notices the baseball stadium.

“What city is this?”

“It’s not a city,” I tell him, “it’s a wasteland, a wreck, a human biological hazard.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“It couldn’t be more boring. A writer lived here once – a gifted story man with a musical ear for poetry, but the city he lived in was so mundane that it drove him to the macabre, horror, fantasy, and mystery – anything to escape the misery of that place. It drove him to drink, to drugs, to the brink of insanity and to well beyond bankruptcy, and then it let him die in the streets. More than a hundred years later, they still exploit the poor bastard, using his most famous character to disguise the football team they stole from a poor Ohio city because they were too stupid to keep their own.”

I must sound angry because Milac asks politely for the first time since I met him,

“Can I see this wretched travesty of the urban commonplace?”

“Not with me you can’t.” I keep driving south.

In Washington, I make up for skipping Baltimore by showing Milac everything.⁵⁸

From the bullet that killed Lincoln to the Georgetown canal, from the slums of Anacostia to the Watergate Hotel, from best head shop in Adams Morgan to the National Air &

⁵⁷ You’re easily amused.

⁵⁸ I, however, am not.

Space Museum, it takes a couple days, but I let him see the whole lot. And for all the massive monuments, all the carefully planned architecture, all the evidence of human organization being tested, synthesized, altered by concept and put into practical use, the thing that impresses Milac the most is the large number of Ethiopian restaurants. The old man likes his irony cruel.

As we walk down East Capitol Street, Milac stops to take in the view. I wait impatiently until I notice the way the morning light reflects off the Capitol dome and I feel a certain awe overtake me.

“That building holds it all,” Milac’s words break the early hush. “The wisdom and the folly, the dreams and the fears, the knowledge and the misery, the miraculous triumphs and the unforgivable mistakes. Still confusing, almost unmanageable, but a condensed representation of the vast expanse of American life.”

“It’s an incredible institution,” I almost whisper, as though in prayer.

“But it is of the past. It doesn’t speak for today. That is my job, for I shall know the living America, and this building holds nothing more than the numberless Americas of the already dead.”

“What do you mean...?” I start to ask. Then I notice that while I’ve been facing west, staring at the legislative chambers, Milac’s been looking southward, nearly genuflecting before the Library of Congress.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ At least you were wise enough to cut this account short, before you got the chance to embarrass yourself (or me) too much further...

VA, NC

On a one-lane highway southwest of Richmond, we finally reach real country. We've driven through bits of forests and fields and smaller-than-average towns, but until this point, we have yet to free ourselves from the D.C.-Boston megalopolis, a region where the sound of traffic never quite goes away.

It's easy to forget just how big the Commonwealth of Virginia is. Vast sections of it exist where you can drive for hours and pass through nothing but places that could be called towns only out of a sense of obligatory politeness. We're currently in the middle of one of these open spaces and I'm praying we don't run out of gas. The scenery lulls us into quiet contemplation. The small mountains, the trees, and the gently rolling farmland all add to the pleasing (if somewhat monotonous) panorama, but Milac seems to be getting bored.⁶⁰ He fidgets constantly in his seat, and when we lose the signal from Richmond, he won't stop playing with the radio tuner.

Driving due south near the North Carolina border, we see nothing but farmland spreading out to the horizon, and all this fertile, rolling earth supports the tender, leafy, aromatic green covering of nearly mature tobacco plants. The rich, gentle scent of the sun-bathed vegetation permeates the warm air that pours through the open windows and into our lungs. It smells like a Cuban florist shop. As we crest a small hill, I see what looks like a radio tower in the distance. A quarter mile down the road, I recognize it for what it is – a three-hundred-foot-tall fiberglass crucifix.

⁶⁰ How nice of you to notice.

This plain white giant sits in the middle of the field, set off against both the green of the crop and the empty blue sky. With its crossbar perpendicular to the path of the highway, its size and design make it impossible to miss coming from any direction. Milac stares at it as its size grows with our approach, his eyebrow cocked in wonder.

“Welcome to Christian country,” I try to explain. “Although the bulk of America adheres at least marginally to one form of Christianity or another, we’re now entering a region where particularly vocal versions of the faith tend to hold sway.”

Milac keeps staring.

“You’ll see this sort of thing across much of the South, especially inland. They call it the Bible Belt. Folks take their religion pretty seriously here. Same thing with their pious rhetoric.” I click the radio over to AM and immediately find the voice of a preacher telling the airwaves what they should and should not do and the eternal consequences thereof. Milac listens, fascinated, periodically looking back up at the cross.

“They’re allowed to do this?” he asks. “To just tell everyone to worship their god?”

“Yeah, they can say just about anything they want.”

“But listen to the propaganda,” he yells at the radio, “that man is threatening people! He says I’ll be burning. He says pitchforks and brimstone. He says I *must* do what he says, believe what he says, or *else*!”

“It’s a free country,” I say, trying not to sound like a teenager talking to the cops. “You’ll hear that phrase a lot.”

“Doesn’t it cause civil unrest? Are there no holy wars or inquisitions? That man is sowing the seeds of violent division. Don’t you think it’s a danger, a hazard, a menace to the common weal, the national unity, the public health?”

“Not really, no. Maybe his message is dangerous, maybe it isn’t. But nobody is forced to listen to him... except his kids.”

We pass by the cross, but Milac repeatedly looks at it over his shoulder and in the side mirror, keeping it under careful watch.

A couple miles later, in the midst of another sprawling tobacco farm, an old tractor barn has a brand new sign painted on its side. In twenty-foot-high letters, it simply reads, “WWJD?”

Milac ventures a guess. “Is it a radio station?”

“Nope. More Christians. The tobacco farmer that owns that barn wants you to ask yourself this one question every time you face a moral dilemma. WWJD stands for ‘What Would Jesus Do?’”

Milac puts his hands to his head. “If Jesus wanted to feed his family, he would advertise the product he farmed on this barn instead of asking impossible questions!”

“Actually,” I bite my lower lip for a second, “if Jesus did that, he’d face hefty fines, have his sign torn down, and possibly be imprisoned.”

“For painting his barn?”

“For advertising tobacco on a billboard.”

“But you said that Christians can say anything.”

“Almost anything. It’s illegal to advertise tobacco products on billboards.”

“Why?”

“Because smoking kills people,” I reply, “that’s why.”

“And religion doesn’t?”

“Not directly. No.”

“But neither does my billboard for Jesus Christ Brand Cigarettes!”

I’m kind of losing ground here, so I try to remember the argument justifying the ban that I read in a newspaper somewhere. “Yeah, but open-air cigarette advertisements directly lead to an increase the number of smokers, which increases smoking-related diseases, so it’s really just a question of public health.”

“But nobody is forced to listen to my message. If I paint a billboard of the savior rolling wastepaper into weed and getting a light from Judas, anyone who doesn’t like it can simply look away.”

“Maybe grownups would be able to ignore it, but the problem is that children see the billboards too.” Now I remember. This is the kicker. “Kids are impressionable. They can’t filter these messages out the same way adults can. So it’s wrong to subject them to that kind of danger because smokers who start early will usually smoke until they die. They can’t mentally defend themselves when they’re young, so it’s not fair.”

Milac gazes at me, scanning me for even a hint of sarcasm. “I see.” He doesn’t find any. “That makes sense. It would be unfair to try to influence kids *that* way. Still, I’m surprised the tobacco growers don’t see cigarette purchasing decisions as complex moral dilemmas.”⁶¹

“What do you mean?”

“WWJS?” Milac says, stone-faced serious. “What Would Jesus Smoke?”

⁶¹ I’m impressed that you finally record a conversation we had more or less accurately, but the seriousness with which you convey items of obvious sarcasm boggles my mind.

A short distance across the border, we find another Christian farmer devoted to billboard evangelism. This one wants everyone to know and follow the “Holy Ten Commandments.” The first sign displays the whole list in the classic double-tablet form, but for emphasis, or maybe just in case you’re driving too fast, he has ten more billboards spaced out evenly over the next ten miles, each featuring one of the rules that the owner of the land believes everyone absolutely must obey. Driving along on that lonely road, you get a free fifteen-minute Bible lesson in three-foot, bold, all-caps letters.

When we reach the sign that forcefully reminds us that “**THOU SHALL NOT KILL,**” Milac makes me stop the car so that he can take a picture⁶² of the billboard sitting in the middle of a vast expanse of carefully cultivated tobacco.

⁶² I don’t own a camera. We just stopped to appreciate and stare. Isn’t that enough?

The unceasing flow of the water into the ocean from two different rivers helps to continually carve, clear, and recarve the deep and expansive Charleston Harbor. From our perch at the end of East Battery Street, at the very tip of this obtruding, peninsular city, the port's floor of sand, mud, stone and the accumulated debris of three centuries of human occupation seems to hide from our view beneath a heavy blanket of cold, dark, brackish water. The warm ocean breeze rustles our clothes and the bright morning sun reflects brilliantly off of the calm, dazzling surface of the harbor. A few small sailboats skim across this fluid tabletop, leaving no wakes, careful not to disrupt the glass-like image of relative permanence that the water presents to the sky even though it never stops moving as fresh water pours into it from the land, mixes with salt, and inevitably assimilates, becoming one with the vast undrinkable sea. And on the bed that supports this cauldron of change the sediment includes all the precipitates of history, from broken hulls and human remains to old British shells and rusted scraps of Confederate submarine. A veritable junkyard of violence and tragedy litters the bottom with its filthy, jagged vestiges, while far above it the smooth seamless surface of the liquid's present appearance masks any movement at all. The incredible distance, this utter disconnect, this wide open space between the surface and the base allows almost any vessel to pass – it enables the port to trade, to deal, to gather its wealth. This distinctive difference between the bottom and the top defines the city of Charleston.⁶³

⁶³ When stretching an already strained metaphor into an allegory by means of barely tenable mental connections, it's always nice to start the task by choosing the most obvious and overused metaphor in the world. Good call.

Milac and I have been walking around the historic district of town for a couple hours now. We're meeting an old professor of mine later in the day so we have a good chunk of time to kill until then. The weather seems to smile on the city with a gentle wind, an azure sky, and a tender, warming sun. The streets and sidewalks teem with pedestrians, mostly tourists, mainly aged, almost entirely of the Caucasian persuasion. This neighborhood consists of little other than block upon block of architectural eye-candy, but I don't know much about the city⁶⁴ and Milac has limited patience for looking at pretty houses and not hearing any stories about them.

We are down by the waterfront, almost bored enough to break down and buy a guidebook, when we see a large black man dressed in an impeccable white linen suit that makes his smooth dark skin look like velvet coal. Somewhere in the bracket between forty and sixty, the only hints of age I spot on him are a few gray hairs and his thick reading glasses. He stands a full head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd and holds a small hand-sign that says "Free Tour." He does not speak, he does not smile, and he does not move, but about twenty people have already gathered around him, waiting for the tour to start. Shortly after we join the group, he carefully puts his sign away, and begins his opening speech. He introduces himself as Malvin Roger,⁶⁵ the son of a son of a slave, and points out the historical irony of his giving his services away for free today.

⁶⁴ This is clear. But why let that stop you from judging it?

⁶⁵ The volunteer guide's name was Joe. Why do you change his name? And if you must, why do you name him after a Hawthorne story about obsessive guilt? Are you writing with a sledgehammer?

He speaks in a deep baritone and uses the careful, Anglophile pronunciations of the ostentatiously-educated.

“...during the first half of the nineteenth century, working docks made up much of this area of the waterfront, and this particular location was the site of the single busiest open-air slave market in the United States of America...”

On hearing this, Milac leans over and whispers a question in my ear. “There are slaves in America?”⁶⁶

“No.” I whisper back. “But there used to be. A long time ago.”

“...on this very spot, my own great-great grandfather was auctioned off into a thankless lifetime of involuntary servitude,” he cracks a smile for the first time in his performance, “sold by people who looked an awful lot like you kind folks.”

The crowd of tourists look around at one another, slightly taken aback. They know that what he just said is true, but it doesn’t seem to be the polite sort of thing to bring up. Malvin doesn’t say anything else for a full minute after this, but just shifts his gaze from face to face, maintaining the first unsettling grin. Then the smile disappears and he begins talking again, rattling off facts and figures about the maritime history and significance of the city, but conspicuously avoids mention of slaves.

“... and now, follow me, and I’ll show you some of the architectural wonders that our little neighborhood has to offer...” Mr. Roger leads the groups down Tradd Street, points out homes of the Georgian and Colonial periods, discusses the city’s Grand Modell plan of 1680, and stops in front of the most ornate mansion I’ve ever seen in my life. The building is perfectly preserved, as though its original inhabitants still live there. Malvin

⁶⁶ What level of naivety is necessary to believe such a level of naivety?

lectures on the finer aspects of the externally visible wood, glass, and metalwork, and then he starts in on the man who built it. “He was the most successful merchant in a city of successful merchants. He held sway over a vast network of trading routes that pushed far inland and out to four continents. However, he was also a man of conscience. He made a principled decision and a public show of the fact that none of his wealth came from human cargo. He strictly forbade his ships to carry or deal in any form of sentient chattel at a time when such was not only legal but extraordinarily profitable...”

Hearing this, the listeners (Milac and myself included⁶⁷) perk up slightly and take even further interest in this particular house until Malvin continues.

“...instead, this great moralist constructed this beautiful house and amassed the fortune that still maintains it today with a trading business based almost exclusively on the export of tobacco, cotton, and rice. Of course, the production of these crops in this region required the involuntary servitude of millions of people,” feet begin to shuffle again as Malvin raises his voice, “and without this forced labor, he never could have made a cent, but oh, sweet lordy, his hands were clean. He certainly held no ethical culpability for the practices, for the evil that made his existence and his worldly gain possible. He was a good man, an upright man, for if he wasn’t, then who among us is?”

At this, he brakes into a small chuckle that lasts for almost five full minutes while he stares at his audience of white folks, many of whom slowly walk away. The rest of us follow him as he resumes the tour, as though nothing strange has happened. His tone remains animated, interested, yet reserved until he finally halts before a massive and elaborate church. The steeple of this house of worship towers above the surrounding

⁶⁷ Speak for yourself. I knew where Joe was headed. It’s not exactly a compelling argument, but it certainly is a common one.

buildings but the posh decadence of its walls matches its neighbors perfectly. He explains about the history and design of the church, its details and its faith, and how service has been held there every week since 1761.

“...it’s probably the holiest place in the whole city... except for the slight reservation that it was constructed entirely with forced labor, and the coffers that paid to maintain it for its first hundred years of existence were filled by spilling the blood of the Negro, and the merciful religion of Christ that it promotes, that its members worshiped, that most of you still worship today,” he points his finger and swings it at all of us, “never spoke out against systematic murder, was used as a tool to help subdue the victims, and even helped to justify the practice. Other than that, it’s a wonderful institution and an exemplary American establishment!”

Malvin Roger laughs hysterically, keeping his index finger extended at the crowd, even as the everyone starts walking away from him, some in offense, some in fear, some in willful confusion. In less than three minutes, only Milac and I remain. I would have left too, but Milac insists on talking to him. Eventually, Malvin calms himself and addresses us. “Any questions?”

Milac steps forward with a curious smile, “Why?”

“That’s hard to say.” Mr. Roger replies. “When a practice becomes part of society, motivations become hazy, institutions self-perpetuating. Perhaps they did it so they could build churches, live in fancy houses, and attain all the lifestyle accoutrements that they had envied in the old world. Or maybe, at a point, you buy slaves to raise more crops to make more money to buy more slaves.”

“No, I mean, why do you lead this tour like this?”

“Me? I just like asking people to think about what they enjoy, what they do, what they believe. People enjoy this place as a preserve of what they think the past looked like, so they need reminders of just what that past contained. Does that answer your question?”

“Absolutely.”

Milac and I meet my old professor among the redbrick paths and moss-laden oaks on the College of Charleston grounds. Professor Macquart Rougon⁶⁸, my old advisor, moved down here from my alma mater after a brief “misunderstanding” with a co-ed up north, but his voice still held the condescending nasal twang of the career academic. Milac wants to know about how education works in America, and Prof. Rougon never misses a chance to pontificate. Milac nearly jumps with excitement when the rambling response to his first question reveals Macquart’s specialization in the 20th century novel.

“So you teach the students why these novels are good?”

“Quite the contrary, I show why they’re bad. I defend the cannon from more recent upstarts, from feeble moderns, from books that others might find *interesting*.”

“But why?” Milac looks stunned.

“Because anyone who thinks that the last hundred years contributed anything either original or worthwhile to literature should be forced to read both Tristram Shandy and Don Quixote and then be dragged out into the street and beaten. Such a person is bound to benefit from either the books or the beating, and will probably enjoy both.”

⁶⁸ What on earth are you trying to say about Zola by giving this idiot a name like this? And why has every name held the same set of initials? The matching of our initials was enough of a coincidence, but why stretch it beyond all plausibility? The incorporation of all others into self or the projection of oneself onto all others is as worn as bowling shoes.

“But why would you specialize in something you hate?” Milac’s grabs his own hair.

“I may detest the actual material, but analyzing it, dissecting it, discovering all the ways in which it is deficient – that’s an immensely gratifying task.”

“Writing about writing?” Milac pleads, “Isn’t that much like masturbating in public? A few freaks may pay to see you do it, but does it create anything new?”

“I enjoy writing about writing,” Marquart replies, curling his lips inward.

“And I enjoy playing with myself, but I hope that won’t be the full extent of my life’s work. How do you find enough freaks to pay you?”

“Lots of the students aspire to teach English themselves someday... although none but a few have any chance for such a position.”

“So it’s a pyramid scheme?” Milac asks.

“No,” Macquart whispers nervously, “it’s not a pyramid scheme. Why does everyone keep saying that?” He looks at me accusingly, but I just turn my head to the floor. I figured this conversation would go wrong, but I didn’t realize how quickly it would burn. “And the college gets money from the government as well,” he continues, “so they must think what we do is worthwhile. We provide a valuable service to both society and to the students, no matter what they go on to pursue.”

“Why is it valuable?” I can’t tell if Milac is curious or just being a prick.

“Because it helps the students get jobs, which lets them earn money, so when they have kids, they’ll be able to send them to college, where I will teach them.”

“So that they too can learn whatever it is that you’ve decided is knowledge?”

“No. So that I can have the intellectual freedom to go on writing about writing in whatever way I wish.”

“So your students, and whoever else the government takes its money from, they spend their life doing things they don’t enjoy in order to pay for you to be able to do what you do like.”

“If you want to look at it that way, I suppose you can,” he looks up and away to show that he refuses to discuss the matter further.

Milac pauses to examine the professor. “Perhaps nothing in this city changes.”⁶⁹

I just shake my head, embarrassed for the both of them.

⁶⁹ I said no such thing. You’ve misquoted and mischaracterized the entire exchange. We were laughing. We all went out and had a drink afterwards. Your Prof. let me in on his best kept secret – that even though facts don’t exist in literary interpretation, that doesn’t stop him from acting as though his opinions are facts.

Even if I thought him rather dense and a bit of a wet blanket, I appreciated his honesty and admired the success of his con. Why would you prefer for me to despise him?

By the time we get to Savannah, Milac Rasselas discovers that he has his drinking shoes on. Wait, I'm told to correct that. He gave up on drinking *shoes* five decades ago. Shoes wear out too easily and loose traction when wet. Milac currently has drinking *boots* on... and he's not completely sure that, technically speaking, they belong to him. This is sometimes an important distinction, but the memory of the night that he acquired them is missing several plot points. This theme reoccurs in many of his stories.⁷⁰

We pick up a case of cold beer at the Kroger and park the car by Forsyth Park. As we walk beneath the overhanging trees, past the azaleas and around the flamboyant fountains, we can see the old houses looking onto the manicured green from all sides, preserved as though frozen in a dark, yet tender past. Passing out of the park, we keep on drinking, and in less than a block, we find ourselves in another park. An obvious pattern begins to emerge as we head towards the river, and park after square after cemetery after park, communal open spaces of intricate beauty pepper the streets of the city. Aesthetically, it's almost overwhelming, like a cake made of nothing but frosting. Still, as I finish off another beer and gaze at yet another example of tree-circled statuary, my thoughts slip back into the same silly, almost reflexive response that I have every time I visit Savannah. So it startles me when, out of nowhere, I hear Milac say exactly what I'm thinking: "Someone should really set a novel here."⁷¹

⁷⁰ Kettle here. Is that pot I hear calling?

⁷¹ Your sarcasm meter seems to be broken. Proper reading here: 100%.

“It’s been done,” I say, “about a thousand times. And poems, and memoirs, and plays, and travelogues, and movies, and just about every combination of every medium you could think of. You’re right. It’s a great setting, but everyone else thinks so too. This much beauty is hard to resist.”

Milac pauses and the sun shines softly through a light canopy of interlocking trees. The shadows form a network of incomplete shade that lends a feel of mixed illumination – not quite indoors, but the outside is never like this. The aura just screams of artifice, and Milac stands there listening.

“It is more than just beauty,” he finally says, cracking open another beer. “Although beauty is not to be taken lightly itself, this place has something more unique than that. This beauty has tragedy inherent in it.”

“Super. Toss me another.” I crush my can as loudly as possible; he continues.

“Of course, tragedy itself contains certain elemental beauties, so much so that many would contend – the ancient Greeks among them – that nothing can ever be fully worthy of the lofty epithet of beautiful without at least a hint of the tragic.”

“You know, Prof. Rasselas, that’s the kind of talk that can spoil an afternoon of drinking. And wouldn’t that be tragic?”

“Not at all.” Milac is either very good at ignoring when he’s being mocked or too polite to be disgusted with me.⁷² “The potential for spoilage, the risk of disaster, this is essential if anything – be it a classical opera or a day at the park – is to transcend the mundane and aspire to beauty. An afternoon of drinking needs its irritating pompous theorizing in order to reach its full potential...”

⁷² Or maybe I was just fucking with you. Minus the “or maybe.”

Perhaps I've underestimated Milac's degree of self awareness.

"... and the Greeks filled their cultural tapestry with examples of this principle..."

Perhaps not.

"... the greatest of their hero, even their gods, all had their flaws, their weaknesses, their imperfections that – in an aesthetic sense – added more to their glory than any of their deeds, even if – in a practical sense – they brought about their downfall, destruction, and untold human misery. Odysseus had his hubris, Achilles those heels, Oedipus had incest, regicide and patricide, and Zeus, among other difficulties, would hump anything that moved."

"So what you're saying is that someone could be a fascinating guy to hang out with, maybe even to drive around the country with, and the fact that he could go off on tangents and be a complete bore for days at a time, that could actually make him more fascinating."

"Exactly," Milac smiles.

"I'm not buying it."

"But a character or companion without such foibles would be like a Late Greek comedy." I take a long pull off my beer and try to ignore him. "These comedies were delightful, perfect and fun, wholly complete unto themselves. Everything worked out in the end, usually in marriage, and they weren't even trying to be ironic. But no one would call them great – they certainly were not beautiful, not like the exquisitely lifelike incompleteness of the tragedies. Beauty needs tragedy. It feeds on it. It demands it."

"Maybe, I guess. But not all conceptions of beauty are that dark." I'm sick to death of Milac's Greeks. "Like the Japanese appreciation of temporary beauty has

nothing to do with the tragic. The perfection of a moment attains ultimate beauty without any masochistic demand for flaws.”

“Are you serious?” Milac gives me the drunken child look again. “The full moon, the cherry blossom, the quintessential images of Japanese aesthetics pulse with the throbbing tragic presence of their transitory nature. One day perfect, the next day gone – what is this if not the very formula of tragedy?”

“It’s a cycle, asshole. The moon’s back next month, the blossoms next year. No drama, just nature, and the cycle itself is another perfection.”

“Yet how many years does one man get? How many moons will he gaze upon? The limit of death inevitably remains, and the cycle forces the contemplation, the finite, the tragic, and in this the beauty of the ephemeral culminates.”

Shit.

I’m not sure if he’s proven me wrong or just lost me.⁷³ Either way, he frustrates the shit out of me. “So what does any of this have to do with that bubbling fountain, with the live oaks overhead, with the omnipresent Southern charm that sits on this city so heavily that it makes it hard to breathe?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s a first.”

“Perhaps the lack of this cycle seems tragic. The beauty of these streets and these building and these spaces feels so clearly and unnaturally permanent. Everything is too preserved. The lack of physical corruption revolts the senses. Like a middle-aged

⁷³ I lost you ages ago, my boy.

woman who still looks sixteen. The lack of tragedy gives flaw to this beauty, and as such creates a tragedy. This unsettles. Memory is beautiful. Resurrection is morbid.”

He stops to place his empty in a flower bed.

The day goes by in predictable fashion, according to set patterns, as though laid out hundreds of years ago, like the grid of an antiquated antebellum river town that the ever-methodical W. Tecumseh Sherman somehow forgot to burn.

Night arrives, and we look at the Savannah River with pints in our hands. The evening is warm, the sky clear, and the bars along the waterfront have tables set up outside to let their patrons enjoy the weather. We drink at a bar with an Irish name, but from where I stand it looks like they all have Irish names, so maybe the city has a friend in the bottle. The place bustles with people, but Milac stays quiet, withdrawn. He works his way over to a far corner near the water and avoids even listening in on other people’s conversations.

Milac spends so much time leaning over the railing, facing the river that I fear he’s going to start in on Heraclitus. That’s when I notice he’s crying. Silent tears run down his face, and by fixing his attention on the dark water flowing by, he attempts to mask the smaller streams.

“Are you all right?” I try to ask casually; I’ve never even seen him sad before.

“This?” He touches his eyes quickly. “Oh, yes, this is nothing – just a melancholy spell: an uneasy memory and a long day in spirits.”

“Did the river remind you of something?”⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Rivers and ports always remind me of him, but how could I tell you that?

“Not the river. The girl.”

The place is packed, but I immediately know who he’s talking about. She sits at the end of the mahogany bar, still visible through the doors, surrounded by a crowd of adoring men. She has delicate, flawlessly symmetrical features, as though a mirror simply reflects one half, and hair so dark and lustrous that it holds an iridescence that makes naming the exact hue impossible. Mature yet childlike, she hits a range between twenty-five and forty. At first, I think she looks like my Leah Kim, but this is a face that no one could forget.⁷⁵

We spotted her when we bought our last drinks, and we stood entranced while she doted on each of her admirers in turn, giving cruel smiles, kind frowns, empty words and bitter giggles according to each man’s need. As we listened, I caught her name, both savage and faithful – Mnemosyne Ruth. Shortly thereafter, Milac pulled us out to the riverside.

“Sounds like a story.” So I’m an asshole, I pry.

“A very old one.”

“Those are the best kind.”

“Fine.” He swigs his beer. “Here it is. She reminds me of girl I knew. The radiant siren of long-gone days that sits on that barstool there – she looks exactly like the girl of my youth, the girl of my dreams, the most beautiful girl in all of Nacirema... and also, thank god, the horniest.” I nearly spit up my drink. “The infamous Moll Roxana – it pains me and arouses me just to say her name. She was a fantasy to every boy, a sweet supple reality to every man, and to every other woman – be she sister, lover, wife or

⁷⁵ I’m fairly certain that she was a call girl.

mother – she was a nightmare. Abandoned in the middle of the town square, Moll grew up as a ward of the state, never knowing her true family, but with a relentless desire to outrage them. And as she grew, her charm, her grace, her endless power of attraction grew with her, such that by the time she turned sixteen, no man could resist her. No one knows exactly when she started taking lovers, but soon enough she had a virtual monopoly on the trade. An entire generation of Nacireman males, myself included, became men in the willing arms of the inexhaustible Moll Roxana.”

I begin to wonder about the role that hyperbole plays in Milac’s stories, his memories, hell, even in his life, but I don’t say anything.

“She became a vital part of the national identity of Nacireman men, a figure of unity, something we all shared, a tender common ground on which to settle all differences, and the spark for Nacirema’s great cultural and artistic renaissance. Who knows what we could have achieved as a people, had things not turned out as they always do?” He bites his fist and stifles a sob.⁷⁶ “Why did she have to get married?”

“So she chose one guy, and the rest of you were heartbroken and jealous?”

“Worse. She chose all of us, so we were all heartbroken and everyone was jealous. She married every single man in Nacirema, which was all of them since every married man divorced his wife just to be with Moll. She had us all. She was a queen. We would have done anything for her. For her, we *could* have done anything. But the universal matrimony was the last straw for the rest of the women. They dealt with being ignored, abandoned and forgotten, but when Moll Roxana had the gall to formalize the situation legally, they put an end to their tyrant. They killed her, cut her up into pieces,

⁷⁶ I readily admit my limits as an actor, but ham that I am, I play to my audience.

and fed her to us in a soup, we poor unsuspecting men, so that we'd never go looking for her again." He ends his story and stares at Mnemosyne Ruth, longingly.

"Talk to her – it'll do you good," I suggest. He's got at least three decades on her, but I doubt he cares. "Relive the good part of an old story, or make a new one."

"No." He smiles and takes a drink. "I know her too much already. I don't need to talk to her... but you do."⁷⁷

⁷⁷ You end this story here? You end where you should begin.

You should tell about how you talked to her, how you drank with her, how you closed the bar down with her, how you whispered to her sweetly so that even I couldn't hear, how the light in the street hid your kisses in shadows, how she invited you back to her room for the night, and how this offer awoke you and sent you running and crying, away from her cold passion to the warmth of a payphone and a long-distance lover, where I overheard you weep your confessions of lips and of laughter to the lenient "Leah," who forsook then forgave and forgot her forsaking, and the two of you mumbled drunk vows over hundreds of miles of instant audio contact.

An anticlimactic moment to be sure, but a tender one. A three-dimensional one.

And this omission wouldn't be so cruel if this were an isolated incident. But every time you drink, you call the poor girl. You can't go a day without saying you miss her. Yet none of this shows up so far. I'd say I was disappointed if I wasn't so confused.

This oversight, this mistake, it's so painfully palpable that it sickens me. How can you manage to so neatly excise all that which might make you real to a reader? I can take no more of this tonight. Perhaps, in the future, I'll read again...

III

“Find some common desire, some widespread unconscious fear or anxiety; think out some way to relate this wish or fear to the product you have to sell; then build a bridge of verbal or pictorial symbols over which your customer can pass from fact to compensatory dream, and from the dream to the illusion that your product, when purchased, will make the dream come true.”

- Aldous Huxley, *The Arts of Selling*

“Although romantic love always verges on the ridiculous (we would find it comic if a man died of starvation because he could not obtain any brussel sprouts) Western peoples generally and Americans in particular have shown an impressive tendency to take it seriously.”

- Philip Slater, The Pursuit of Loneliness

S.A.

The hydraulic lift forces the metal hide up between his legs as Milac holds on to the saddle with one white-knuckled hand and eyes the size of Texas. For having no idea what he is pretending to do, he's pretty good at it. He manages to cling to the imitation beast as it bucks him toward the ceiling three full times, but the fourth oddly-timed jerk sends him reeling over the front of the contraption, flipping entirely onto his back and landing on the wide circle of padding. A cheer goes up from the small throng of spectators – less for his performance than for his age and moxie; in his late sixties, Milac claims the title of *Far West Rodeo's* oldest voluntary mechanical bull rider.

I help him to his feet, slap him on the back, and hand him a longneck beer. Everyone here holds a bottle of beer – it's part of the uniform. Almost everyone wears cowboy boots, too. Half have the hats. Beyond similar clothing tendencies of the clientele, a certain sameness gets actively enforced. When we walked in the door, the bouncer demanded that we tuck in our shirts. This is not a place for slovenly cowboys.

Milac walks gingerly and bowlegged, his undercarriage still in recovery.

“No auto-haiku for the *Auto-Bronco*?” I ask.

He just shakes his head slowly and chugs half his beer.

The surroundings still have him a bit at a loss.⁷⁸ I'd be rather confused myself if I hadn't been here a few times before. Something about the place pulls me back again and again. Centered around a giant hardwood dance floor and a fully synchronized multi-

⁷⁸ The surroundings were fine. It was the mild concussion that had me at a loss.

It's early morning now, Rosinante sits on the side of a road somewhere in West Texas, and you're fast asleep after driving most of the night. I'm awake, so I read this crap.

media stage, the two-floored, laser-lightshow equipped country music showplace has eight complete bars, twelve beer stations, countless roaming shot girls, functioning fog machines, a painfully powerful sound system, a plethora of video display screens, and one feisty mechanical bull. It's enough to make John Wayne rise from the dead and kick everybody's ass, and these are all mere fringe benefits. Just off the interstate, three exits south of San Antonio, the *Far West Rodeo* is not a cowboy bar – this is a cowboy multiplex, a neon shindig, a hootenanny on acid with a Benzedrine chaser, an urban-techno-cell phone-cowpoke-super jamboree.⁷⁹

But the booze, the tunes, the volatile mixture of electronics and slide-guitar, the brutality of the metal Brahman, even the relentless dancing in boots, none of these are *Far West's* main attraction, just like *Far West* is far from San Antonio's central star.

*

Earlier today, Milac and I made our pilgrimage to the Shrine itself, to the holiest of holy for the phony tough and crazy brave, to the very Kaaba of this rolling prairie, lone star Mecca, to the beating heart of the heart of Texas – The Alamo. I remembered it.⁸⁰ The downtown setting, amid skyscrapers and impossible parking, the garden atmosphere, and the scale-model diorama depicting the actual battle, all served to undermine the sacred import, the solemn reverence that the monument holds in the psyche of the local populous. Milac remained thoroughly unimpressed as we wandered the grounds and

⁷⁹ In other words, it's a hybrid product of a pluralistic culture. How is this strange?

⁸⁰ Still clever, I see.

viewed the white-walled church itself. I could tell that he didn't see what the big deal was about – until he heard the story.

The late afternoon sun filtered through and reflected off the surrounding buildings, washing the place in an eerie orange glow, as the tour guide filled us in on a mildly jingoistic version of the fight between Santa Anna's horde of thousands and the noble few who gave their lives for the Republic of Texas. I closed my eyes to listen to the details of the tale that had lodged permanently into my skull from its nightly use as a bedtime story for the first five years of my life by my amateur historian mother who had convinced herself, all evidence to the contrary, that Davy Crockett was a distant relation. Hearing about his glorious demise intermingled with my earliest memories of drifting off to sleep, and the whole place held a morbid fairytale quality and a dysfunctionally dear spot in my affection. As the guide finished her thickly-twanged spiel, I opened my eyes slowly, afraid to see the look of bored disdain that I knew Milac would be wearing.⁸¹ But when his face came into view, his pupils were dilated, his jaw slack, and his hair stood slightly on end. In fact, his expression matched almost perfectly the look of the fat seven year old boy who stood next to him in the crowd. Milac had been a changed man since Mississippi. Still, I couldn't read him.

Maybe he spotted yet another uncanny similarity, a telling parallel between this and Nacirema. Maybe he marveled at the determination of one hundred and eighty-five men who fought to the death to define themselves in opposition to a Mexican other. Maybe he struggled with the paradox of fiercely, prototypically, almost psychotically individualistic Texan's giving their lives in communal effort. Maybe he silently

⁸¹ When is my mockery ever this simple?

calculated the price they paid in blood for a hero story of national significance, or the corresponding price that's paid in guilt, fury, and impossible ambition by every new generation that embraces this tale as a foundation for their own. Milac adjusted his look of wonder when he saw the fat kid smiling.

As usually, his words didn't help my attempt at interpretation much.

*Joined to separate
in a fortress church –
death beat in young men's hearts.*

His admiration was sincere.

That I could tell.

He bought a souvenir Bowie knife.⁸²

*

Back in the *Far West*, we stand by the edge of the oak-bottomed sea of Western Terpsichore, watching tooled-and-polished leather footwear slide over a deeply stained and carefully waxed wood in nearly perfect rhythm to the music. The floor in front of us must hold better than three hundred dancers, stepping precisely, stomping on cue, moving their neatly adorned bodies in a pattern identical to that of the neatly adorned bodies that

⁸² Is this a haiku? Is this intentional? Are you so poor a judge of human reaction (or am I so fine an actor) that you actually thought me sincere? Or have you finally wised up to the point where you've begun to fuck with my head as well? Is the page number a clue?

surround them. With every song it plays, the band on stage recedes farther into the background of importance as more people pour onto the floor and join the human spectacle for which the band serves as merely an elaborate jukebox.

The lines of legs form and rotate before us. Arms bend, spin and clap with ritualistic regularity. Torsos shift, leap and thrust – though not in an obscene way, mind you – with a degree of unison that would put synchronized swimmers to shame. It strains the imagination to think this performance spontaneous – to realize that these folks don't know one another, that they don't practice, that they have no choreographer piloting them as a whole, that just like any other dance, this represents a free expression of emotion, feeling, and individual choice translated into physical movement, even if these unique representations of internal identity are all exactly the same. Whatever causes it – be it culture, tradition, a common systematic educational structure, or simply a profound lack of creative initiative – the visual effect of this massive, twisting, tightly-costumed, perfect line dancing is absolutely mesmerizing.

We stare.

It's *Triumph of the Will*, but with string ties.⁸³

Then the music dies away and a giant message flashes up on all the video screens simultaneously:

RODEO IN FIFTEEN MINUTES!

Even if he's willing to, Milac doesn't have time to ask what this means before we're swept up in the crowd – former dancers and spectators alike – as it pushes toward the nondescript doorway at the far right of the stage. Through this entryway, we surge

⁸³ Line-dancers equate to Nazis? That seems reasonable.

into another attached building, half-again the size of the first, like a large airplane hangar with a dirt floor, metal bleachers, and a loop of thick steel fencing in the middle.

Penned, herded, and prodded by the shoulders, backs, and fronts of our fellow *Far West* patrons, we're pressed into the aluminum grandstand and down to the very end of the first row. From here we watch the neo-rodeo pre-game warm-up of colored spotlights and bad-ass clowns. I enjoy it as much as ever, but Milac is befuddled. He can't figure out what the hell's going on – a circus, a prize fight, a county fair livestock show – nothing he knows could prepare him for this. When the mood turns solemn and the entire gathering – drunks and all – stands hand on heart to sing the national anthem and the master of ceremonies leads everyone – including the make-up-smeared clowns – in a prayer that nobody gets hurt, Milac – by virtue of nothing more than the discomfort of incomprehension visible in his face – looks more inherently alien to his surroundings than I've ever seen him before.⁸⁴

Then everything is quiet, the clowns take their positions, and the gate at the end of the steel loop springs open, loosing a thousand pound bull into the ring with a comparatively tiny man perched on top of it. As the giant beast bucks and kicks and spins and thrusts, the man stays on him for a split second – and one second later he's thrown several yards away and is scrambling towards the fence as the clowns distract the bull. This brings the bull within four feet of our seats, and Milac nearly jumps up, before the animal gets turned back around and lured into the holding area.

⁸⁴ I knew what a rodeo was. My head was spinning. I couldn't see straight. But you've once again mistaken the physical effects of having my head slammed against the bar floor with an experiential dislocation of the unfamiliar. How often to you conflate the internal with the external? The anatomical with the spiritual?

Milac's mouth is open and his skin has gone a sickly white. He looks much more shaken than he was after his own ride on the electronic version.

"Yep. In this bar, Milac, they ride live animals – wild, pissed-off animals."

His mouth jaw drops still lower, his eyes grow still wider, and he crouches his shoulders slightly and scoots further back on the bench, as though he's afraid that the clowns will ask for volunteers to ride like the operator of the mechanical bull did. Milac won't fall for that trick twice.⁸⁵

But with each rider that comes out, he seems less on edge. The shock wears down as he knows what to expect. He watches the animals with great interest and turns to sneak glances at the rest of the audience. How they associate means worlds to Milac, how they view and encourage and appreciate this last, closest remnant of the gladiatorial lion feeding that remains in the American sports entertainment landscape. It fascinates him, and for a short while anyway, it frightens him.

By the time the fifth rider launches into the ring, Milac has lost his fear. He's no longer detached, no longer on a semi-literary, quasi-anthropological journey of discovery, no longer observing the crowd's reaction. He's observing – scratch that – enjoying the rodeo itself.

He's a part of the crowd.

We're a part of the crowd.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Actually, I was just pretty sure I was going to throw up.

⁸⁶ So you interpreted my gradual and partial recovery from a disorienting crash off an electronic catapult as my assimilation into the F-150 crowd? Odd. I wonder what you made of last night...

W. T.

The sun stands straight overhead when we wake up to leave town.

The shower in our motel room runs on quarters, and I'm fresh out of change. Seeped into all my clothes, the heavy perfume of stale beer and cigarettes masks any trace of natural human stink, so maybe missing a shower isn't high tragedy.

Milac doesn't mind. He's already waiting by the car. He's not in a hurry. He's just waiting. This is a good thing.

I have no idea how long it'll take us to get to El Paso.

The scenery just west of San Antonio doesn't merit much description, but what the land lacks in variety and splendor it makes up for in quantity... vast, empty quantity. In the remaining hours of daylight, we pass from rolling hills of tender green to tilted fields of arid tan to rugged tracts of brown rock and brush, while the distance between towns increases at each turn. As signs of human life grow sparser, so do signs of any life, even signs of the basic components of life. It's been more than a hundred miles since we've seen so much as a puddle.⁸⁷

The only living vegetation visible from the road consists of occasional perfect circles of ill-conceived agriculture – doomed crops of wheat and corn that sprout up from a barren land and hold their place against a merciless sun only by virtue of the rotating moisture that sprays out of the giant wheeled mechanical irrigators, slowly pivoting around pumps that pull constant streams of stagnant, mineral-laden well water out from beneath the burnt crust of soil and stone, emptying thousands of gallons from the reserve

⁸⁷ You make rain when there isn't any and you make desserts out of ranchlands. You may be taking this whole omnipotent novelist thing a bit too far.

every day, depleting an ancient aquifer that took a geologic age to fill. Even as the molten orange star⁸⁸ creeps down towards the edge of the sky before us, its brutal heat presses on us, on the land, on these pitiful outpost chlorophyll factories, and we can see the faint steam rising off of the unnaturally drenched plants, the future food products that cook while they grow.

In the twilight just after the fiery orb⁸⁹ dips past the horizon, while the sky is still yellow and red and purple, the gauge on the dashboard tells me that Rosinante needs another petrochemical drink. (I never said the old girl was efficient.) The only station for miles – the only anything for miles – is a tiny shack with a single pump. Milac looks around and hits the can – well, the outhouse really – and I fill up the tank. As the metal dials start to move on the ‘70s era gas dispenser, their clicking gives way to a gentle whir and I notice the oil equipment bolted into the earth a mere thirty feet behind the building. The huge iron hammer perched atop a massive tripod drops and raises with the uneven consistency of a plastic bird toy, and the steel cables that hold both sides firmly in place push and pull at their elliptical pace. As the fuel passes through the nozzle in my hand, I feel the gas pump’s labored efforts to shoot it forward in a series of clicks, and this pressurized chugging falls into rhythm with the oil pump’s lazy movement as it swings up and back against an iridescent atmosphere. I know the connection speaks of nothing but coincidence, and yet it still makes me uneasy.

⁸⁸ Molten orange star? You ass. Say sun.

⁸⁹ Fiery orb? That’s even worse. Who do you think you are, Shakespeare?

When I go into the shack to pay for the gas, I ask the attendant about the mini-rig that rumbles behind him. “You strike oil out back or something?” I smile.

The man squints at me with a dirty face, and in sad irritation he says, “I didn’t.” The name embroidered on his uniform reads *Mike*. He hands me the change and adds, “Your friend asked the same question.”

Back on the road, we find ourselves speeding through expansive fields of oil exploration. At various distances, the swaying iron hammers of the wells seem to line the path on either side of the road, punctuated by an occasional full sized drilling rig playing sentinel, watching over its minions as it pushes into what they pump out. The waving motion of the ubiquitous machinery lends an uncanny animation to the desolate peripheral landscape as the darkness envelopes all colors and shapes to leave a disembodied perception of kinetic activity rippling through the unseen countryside. It’s another two hours before I notice the lights.

When the sun’s reaching tendrils of illumination fade to a vague memory and the visible world consists of the two overlapping triangles of brightness peering out onto the asphalt from our headlights, then I begin to see the red dots. From their frequency and placement, I assume these lights sit atop the wells that now lay cloaked in dim. These silent beacons of crimson warning keep breaking through the wall of blackness that lines both sides of the road. In their status as safety measures, they almost reassure me, declaring their presence, letting me know I’m not alone, providing a neutral third party to dull the tense antagonism that I feel towards the aging foreigner who sits mutely beside me. Then I look in the rearview mirror.

Looking backwards, instead of seeing one or two little lights, I gaze upon a pitch black vista filled with countless pricks of glowing red that slowly flash from every distance in an undulating irregularity. With an anti-synchronic intelligence of rhythm, the night pulses with hostility. This misshapen wave of demonic fireflies, tapping out their love calls to those who would eat them – it heaves and crashes into my eyes, then pulls out like the tide just to crash in again in a spray of infinite redness. Something about them speaks to me, and I don't like what I hear.⁹⁰

I step on the accelerator and Rosinante's straining engine presses even harder, but the faster we go, the more oil wells we pass, the more crowded the rearview mirror becomes with a swarm of blinking beats of red, a growing pack of hungry animals hunting me down, closing in on me, their advance runners stretching out on both sides of the highway, ready to cut my escape route, to pounce on me, to finish me off. I press the pedal down farther and we lurch forward with still greater haste, but it doesn't help. The mirrors teem with these off-tempo flickers, and in every window their numbers increase. I know that I'm lost when even through the windshield I see off in the distance the winking red eyes of this giant beast stretching up from the deep dark pool, the liquid remains of a million years of death and decay, all the eyes conspiring to bring that crude residue of plankton demise to the surface world, to taint our waters, to burn our air, to release the energy of a thousand years of daylight in single fuel-injected second and propel my car rapidly into the night.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Paranoid much?

⁹¹ Yes, apparently, very much.

My right foot already rests firmly against the floorboard. The engine complains but can't make the car accelerate. Afraid to even look at the speedometer, I just pray the road stays straight. And as I envision the Rosinante careening off a sudden turn – exploding on impact against an iron oil rig, mangling the pipeline, transforming its steady stream of toxic gold, of Texas tea, of money to burn, into a brilliant jet of luminous fire – it suddenly hits me what the red lights are really for. They're too far from the road to ward off oncoming cars, too close to the ground to warn low flying planes. Those thousands of lights, those blinking eyes, those surreal red dots of a hackneyed pointillist landscape – their only purpose is a plane crash; their *raison d'être* is explosion avoidance in case of said crash; their designer's simple hope is that any pilot forced into crash landing in this desolate wasteland will steer clear of the blinking red, hit stone instead of steel, and possibly prevent a man-made jet-fuel/crude-oil/natural-gas volcano large enough to trip a chain reaction, set off well upon well upon well, and ignite the underground pressurized oil bed in a cataclysmic detonation of fossil-fueled fury that could consume half the state with near-biblical wrath.⁹²

Somehow, I don't find this revelation assuring.

While trying to watch the sky for troubled 747s, I swerve across the road. Of course, I can't see anything, but I notice that Milac is looking up as well. For half a second I think his brain has taken him on the same schizoid path as mine, but his regular breathing, his calm demeanor, his lack of profuse sweating dispels this notion. Less than a foot away from me, he dwells in an entirely different universe. The disconnect between

⁹² Is that why you were driving like that? I thought that perhaps you just enjoyed night driving, that you were aiming for a mighty crash, that you were an aesthetician of death at high speed. No, that could make you interesting, instead of merely odd. What a travesty.

our minds is total. He stares above the almost invisible horizon, at the unwavering white lights scattered across the extravagant celestial dome that hovers above us in its colossal, useless beauty.

Milac senses that I'm looking at him for the first time since dusk. He doesn't take his eyes off the heavens, but he can tell when I'm paying attention. He must be able to tell, because that's when he whispers it, just loud enough for me to hear – but only if I'm listening – over the droning of the engine.

*A thousand stars at night,
blossom big, blossom bright:
deep is the heart of Texas.*

He didn't just say that. He did just say that. Oh my god, this is just too perfect. Gone are the thoughts of air disaster. Gone are the worries over petrochemical fumes. Gone are the delusions of satanic, one-eyed oil derricks chasing me down the highway. My pea-sized brain erupts with mirth and vanquishes all competing stimuli. I have to hold my stomach from the joyous pain, and Milac has to grab the wheel to keep us on the road.

Now he stares at me, but I can't quit giggling. I can't control myself, so I slow down the car and we pull onto the shoulder. When we're safely idling, I still can't speak. The chuckles won't clear out of my throat but Milac needs an explanation, so I turn on the radio and start searching the dial. Even in the oil barrens, as far from habitation as possible in this state, it only takes me five minutes to find the song playing loud and clear

on an AM oldies station. The drawling crooner is in the middle of the verse that declares the sage in bloom to be like perfume when we cut in, so we have to wait for the refrain. There it goes...

The stars at night

Are big and bright

Deep in the heart of Texas!

For the first time on the trip, Milac blushes in embarrassment, his eyes wide with shock. I'm still struggling to control my laughter, but it grows a bit easier to sober up as I sense Milac's actual shame.⁹³

I couldn't care less if I offended the old bastard, but I didn't mean to hurt his feelings. I don't want him to think any less of himself, to lose any face, or even question the existence of his renowned command of poetic form and artistic genius,⁹⁴ but that last haiku really did match the song – and not just any song, but the cheesiest of cheese, the tritest of trite, the audio cliché anthem of a state that consists of little else – *Deep in The Heart of Texas*. The wall between intent and effect here is just too high – the austere enlightenment of Zen Buddhist monks versus the syrupy sentiments of 1950s plastic cowboys – too delightful in juxtaposition not to raise a smile. His inspired haiku hit-parade has ground to an inglorious halt, but after another introspective moment, he cracks a weary grin.

⁹³ Shame my ass. I was just shocked that you caught me being lazy. It appeared for a moment as if you might actually have an inkling of the vastness of my insincerity.

⁹⁴ Nope. I need not have worried. You simply assumed I was both honest and stupid.

“Okay,” he says, “I’ll stop.”

As we keep driving through the night, Milac insists that we keep the radio playing – not that particular station, but something, anything, even static if it has to be – to give the night a thoughtless soundtrack.

The road here is littered with dead armadillos. At times, the carcasses cover so much of the pavement that I can’t avoid hitting a few. Their intricate shells offer zero resistance to the crushing mass of the magnificent Rosinante.⁹⁵ How many do I hit? I don’t really know. I stop counting just before fifty.

⁹⁵ And what in the hell is this supposed to be? Semi-Steinbeckian ultra-heavy-handed symbolism? And what are these “intricate shells” that you crush so easily? Artistic pretensions? Delusions of adequacy? Perceptions of reality as variably constructed as randomly chosen interpretations of a text?

Your arrogance is rivaled only by your ignorance. Is this whole notebook filled with such tripe? Where did I leave off last? In the Peach state, I believe...

Amid rolling fields of fluffy Georgian cotton, just a few miles outside of Andersonville, we stop at the once infamous prison. Now it's a military cemetery and a museum dedicated to all American POWs, but they've reconstructed a few stern-looking, Civil War era white-walled stockades and the tour – or our tour guide, anyway – still concentrates on the Confederate atrocities.

The tiny old man, on the far side of ninety, moves with the desperate enthusiasm of one near death. He speaks with the precise and measured diction of man not born to it, and his face – more wrinkle than skin – seems to ripple with every energetic expression. He introduces himself as MacKinlay Rotnak and shows us around the prison. His descriptions of the lack of food, the exposure to the elements, the crowding, the filth, and the untreated epidemics of scurvy and dysentery are so vividly graphic,⁹⁶ so filled with raw emotion, that you'd think he'd witnessed every day of the fourteen months that it existed, that he'd been close friends with each of the thirteen thousand Union captives that died there, that he held a personal grudge against the superintendent of the prison, Major Henry Wirz, who “was tried as the war criminal that he was, convicted of murder, and hung by his neck until he was dead.”

But as we circle back to the entrance, expecting the tour to wrap up to a conclusion, Mr. Rotnak just keeps walking and we continue following. As he takes us across the street, to the other side of Highway 49, his gait becomes looser, almost a swagger, and his speech adopts a sudden and wholly distinctive drawl. Over here we

⁹⁶ Thank you for not relating the guide's vividly graphic dysentery descriptions.

enter the Andersonville Civil War Village, a gaudy collection of gift shops and reenactors, centered on a monument to the same Major Henry Wirz – and to Southern hospitality in general. Without so much as a break in the monologue, an “on the other hand,” or a segue of any kind, our tour guide solemnly defends the man, the institution, and the falsely tarnished honor of the entire Confederation, explaining that Dr. Wirz – “for he was a man of healing before the troubles” – had done the best he could with his limited supplies, medicine and manpower in a war where, even in their own camps, more soldiers died of dysentery than of bullets. “An innocent scapegoat to Yankee anger, Wirz stands tall as yet one more martyr to the lies that some call history.” When this alternate rant comes to a close, the crowd is confused and more than a little uncomfortable. Milac looks bored, so we go to the car and get back on the road.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter. “I’ve never seen such a split in one person.”

“What? The old man?” Milac asks. “That was all show. Mock psychosis. Simple entertainment and fake impartiality by means of mutually conflicting concurrent polemics. A hedge against offending the audience, a guarantee of no complaints, and a sympathy generator for bigger tips.”

“No way. That was the real deal. He was genuinely split, conflicted, torn. A man struggling to escape from the contradictions of his upbringing, his people, his education, his culture – he’s indicative of his generation, of his region, of his time, of the American South fighting to free itself from the steel-talons of the past, clawing to get out from underneath the monstrous weight of a blood-ridden and gangrenous heritage.”⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Are you trying to claim that history is a nightmare from which he’s trying to wake up, James? Or are you trying to say that he doesn’t hate the South, he doesn’t hate it, he doesn’t hate it, William?

These people, this place, they're still not clear of it, and in its sticky wake, everything stagnates, everything slows, everything cripples and falters and, entangled in the endless system of societal roots, everything fails to move forward or anywhere for that matter. It abso-fucking-lutely tragic, but the people of this land are trapped by its history."

Milac stares at me. With good cause, I suppose. "Bullshit."

"Bullshit? Why bullshit? Why is everything always bullshit?"

Milac smiles. "History doesn't trap anyone. People trap themselves. History is as good an excuse as any, but it's still an excuse. Just like any excuse. Family is another common one – a variant of history, really. Weather is my favorite. That could work here." He wipes the sweat from his brow. "Why cultural stagnation? Humidity. Why poor race relations? The heat. Why a cultural inferiority complex that manifests in a defensive posture of manic self-righteousness? An agrarian economic reliance on an irregular and insecure rainfall pattern."

"That's total bullshit."

"Exactly. So is history."

"But there are givens created by past actions. Antecedents exist and limit present possibilities. That's just simple fact. It just is!"⁹⁸

"Weather just is as well. And like history, you get used to it after a while. It blends into the background. Perhaps that's your problem. Your history is too new. You haven't gotten used to living with it yet. When this country has a few thousand years behind it, instead of a couple hundred, then it will cease to feel compelled by it.

Nacirema stretches back farther than the mountains that surround it – its very existence

⁹⁸ At what point in Junior High School did you decide to stop learning? Does chaos and string theory and probability mean nothing to you?

shaped those mountains... with a little help from the weather. In fact, the story of our national disillusionment with the tenacity of fact is also the origin of our geography.”

“Is this going to be one of your longwinded, fantastical, quasi-allegorical tales?”

Milac slowly nods his head.

“Just checking.”

“Nacirema has always been a mountain nation, but it used to be a mountaintop nation. The entire country revolved around the tallest mountain in the Nacireman Range, and at the very peak of this mountain, at the very center of our land, there stood a massive and immovable object – the symbol of our people, the center of our consciousness, the link to our past – the Great Nacireman Tree. Straight up from the mountaintop, it shot hundreds of feet into the air, its branches stretching out, shading the entire mountain, acting as a landmark visible from every point in our country. And in the thick brown bark that covered this monster, we recorded our history.

“Starting at the very top, thousands upon thousands of years ago, when the tree was still a sapling and the mountain still a hill, the first Naciremans carved their names into the uppermost branches. As the tree, the mountain, and the nation grew, each subsequent generation would carve their names and lives in the bark as well – recording births, deaths, real estate transactions – slowly moving down the tree. And the nation flourished, the tree thrived, and the mountain pressed upward, raising all three to new heights. But eventually – at the start of what came to be known as the Endless Winter – we reached the bottom of the tree-trunk. There was no more room to write our names, and we knew that this could only mean trouble.

“With no place to record them, events refused to happen. No marriages could be celebrated. No buildings could be built. Pregnant women refused to give birth to babies who could not be named. And when the snow and wind of winter crept into their eighth and ninth months, we realized that even the seasons refused to change. With no spring plantings, no summer sun, and no fall harvest, our granaries soon ran out. As our livestock starved to death we ate them, one by one, and when they were all gone, we began to starve ourselves. Most thought that we were doomed, but our luck was not so good. We slowly grew accustomed to the gnawing pangs of hunger, but after months with nothing to eat but ice, we realized that, with no place on the tree to record our passing, none of us could die.

“So we all settled in to wait this whole winter thing out, and aside from a little cabin fever, it wasn’t so bad... until another shortage hit us. Firewood. The contents of our woodsheds lasted for two years. The sheds themselves and some of the older houses kept our homes heated two more after that. Then we started clearing out the frozen, leafless forests that refused to grow as we cut them down. Even though the cold refused to kill us, we’d have rather been dead than endure the frigid pain of a Nacireman winter night without a fire. But in just three more ceaselessly frigid years, we’d burnt every fencepost, every sign, every single stick of furniture, and every scrap of every tree in the nation... except one.

“Honestly, no one even considered the obvious. The Great Tree was more than a symbol to us. It was who we were. It was our identity. It was the closest thing we had to a religion, a faith, a belief. It loomed over everything and no one could even conceive of Nacirema without it. We were about to burn our axe-handles and resign ourselves to the

ice when we heard a cracking overhead and one of the oldest branches came crashing to earth under the weight of dripping wet snow. Everyone stared at it, knowing that underneath the thick layer of white crystals, the lives of our forefathers sat, carefully etched into the ancient bark that covered this giant log of sweet, combustible cellulose. Then the wind picked up again, and we dove into chopping and hauling it away.

“That single branch kept the entire population warm for a month. As each piece was burned, we read the names aloud in sad apology and desperate prayer. When this stockpile ran low, we anxiously hoped for more windfalls, but when none came, we faked it. Under cover of night, a team of men climbed into the tree. The noise kept everyone awake for miles upon miles, but in the morning, we all rejoiced that more branches had fallen overnight. These logs were burnt with equal reverence and attention to careful pronunciation, but somehow they seemed to go faster and in just a few weeks, the nocturnal chopping could be heard again. This charade lasted, and the rate of incineration increased, until a night’s worth of timber fueled little more than a day. Then we dropped all pretences and the men worked around the clock in shifts, cutting the branches off as fast as they could, just to keep our fires alive.

“Two more years passed before we felled the last limb, and then the tattooed trunk stood tall and lonely like a colossal tattooed frozen penis.”⁹⁹ It took a week just to topple this wonder, and its mighty girth gave another two years of relative warmth. When the last of this was spent, we salvaged what we could out of the enormous stump, and as we hacked away, we realized that it kept going down. The wooden roots stretched

⁹⁹ I’m almost proud of this line. I thought it a nice touch. Paging Dr. Freud.

just as far down into the earth as the tree itself had soared into the sky, and when we couldn't get any more out with our axes, we turned to our shovels.

“As we dug and cut and dug and cut, we noticed that – just like the wood above the earth – the roots had names written on their surface, but these were names we'd never heard before. Still, we read them as we burned them and their sound in our ears held a charm not easily shaken. Before long, the women were digging alongside the men, slicing into the fibrous roots, careful to preserve every name for the fire. The excavations continued non-stop, night and day for ten more years. We kept pulling more twisted wood out of the earth, and even as our mine hollowed out the mountain, the rich veins of flammable, name-bearing roots drove still farther down. By the time we pulled the last root out to the surface, the mountain was little more than a conical shell of dirt and ice sitting over a vast, almost endless chasm.

“And when we eventually burned that final root, we read the final name – it was Milac Rasselas – and the clouds began to clear. For the first time in decades, the sun showed itself, and spring arrived in an instant. Of course, as the dome of snow melted, the ground beneath our fields, beneath our houses, beneath our feet gave way. Within a matter of minutes, the entire nation fell thousands of feet straight down as its frozen support collapsed beneath it. As we crawled out from the rubble, we found ourselves at the bottom of a deep valley, the mountains towering over us from every side. Half the population died in the crash, but half of the remaining gave birth to young ones who'd been waiting inside for years. We set to work rebuilding the nation at its new elevation and naming the newborns from the list of subterranean suggestions. Years passed before

anything really seemed normal again, and centuries passed before anyone from Nacirema left that man-made valley.” Milac looks out the window, as though he’s finished.

“And the point?” I ask.

“The weather didn’t trap us, our digging did. We could have left at any time, but we chose to remain, to dig in, to entomb ourselves in the paths dictated by our past.”

“But those kids,” I say, “born in a gorge, the history of the place trapped them.”

“Bullshit.” He forces a smile. “In any successive generation, we could have dug ourselves out of that pit, just as we dug ourselves into it. Not digging also trapped us.”¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Of course, as you pointed out, this story could have been used to support the opposite conclusion. In this way, it is similar to any story. Everything lies in the willful interpretation. But longwinded, fantastical, quasi-allegorical tales are particularly ripe for alternative significances. That’s why I prefer that form.

M.I.A.

Driving south down Route 1, the horizon never changes. To one side, an ocean dotted with cut-ribbon islands. To the other, an expanse of shallow property. The surrounding topography remains constant for hours, and the tiniest ridge lets you see to the ends of the earth. These quick glimpses leave a strong impression of the thinness of the surface upon which everything rests.

On a run-down street in Little Haiti, Milac wants to buy a live chicken.

Actually, he wants to buy three live chickens.

And on this single block, there exist three different vendors who offer such merchandise. The men stand on the sidewalk, their wares in make-shift wire cages. The birds look sickly, rumped, feathers missing, skinny, wiry, much the worse for wear. Their owners don't look much better. Milac takes his time examining them. He wants to make sure he makes the best selections.

"They all look pretty sorry to me. There's not a pound of meat on any of those things." He ignores my protests. "Where the hell are you planning on cooking them, anyway? Wouldn't it be simpler to go to a restaurant?"

At this, all three of the chicken peddlers, Milac, and even a few of the chickens laugh. The largest of them all, a tall, thin black man with three missing front teeth, puts his hand on my shoulder and explains in a heavy Caribbean-French accent, "De animals not to eat. De animals to sacrifice."

Welcome to Miami. Bienvenido a Miami.

It's morning still, but here the wheels of capitalism do not restrict their hours of turning. In the twenty minutes we stand there inspecting poultry, various pedestrian entrepreneurs offer us jewelry, crack, and sexual favors in at least four different languages. I just shake my head and look away – it being far too early in the day to find these propositions even entertaining – but Milac greets all the purveyors with a smile, a brief conversation in their particular pidgin, and a friendly refusal of goods or services. He eventually opts to get the tall man's chickens, and after they hold a long discussion in an incomprehensible tongue that I can only guess is Haitian Creole French, I'm informed that we have a new friend and his name is Michel Rouge.¹⁰¹

Michel's grin looks a bit too enthusiastic for a man in a filthy white linen shirt who just sold three chickens from a street corner, but we shake hands, and then he and Milac continue the chattering that leaves me clueless.¹⁰² I assume they're debating the price. I don't want to think about what else they might be negotiating. I really don't want to think about the chickens themselves. I wonder how much they'll stink up the car, which currently sits at the other end of the block, where I can keep an eye on it. It's not that I'm paranoid, but there is a lot of broken window glass on the curbs around here.

I glance back to Milac, and chickens in hand, he's heading around the corner with Michel. I run over to catch up with him.

“Where are you going?”

“To the priest,” he says, as though nothing could be more obvious. “Michel knows one nearby.”

¹⁰¹ Your M.R. thing grows tiresome, although I suppose it will blend into the background.

¹⁰² Never underestimate chicken merchants' knowledge. They are privy to untold secrets.

“What exactly are you going to do?”

“Exactly what it looks like. I have a couple debts to pay.”

“Debts to who?”

“Asclepius.”

When I start to ask him who the hell Asclepius is,¹⁰³ Michel stops us and ushers us into the side door of a non-descript one-car garage sandwiched between a dry cleaner and a boarded-up market.

Inside, the dim light filters in through the tiny grime-caked windows in the massive rolling garage door. The room is a simple square, but images and sculptures of Roman Catholic saints line the three non-opening walls. Small candles sit before each representation, but the far corner holds the main altar. Behind it, a vague, half-sized statue of a semi-benevolent-looking man stands between two iron drums. Symbols and instruments of indeterminate origin spread out on the walls, ceiling, and floor from this iconic focal point, but the item that captures my rapt attention sits directly in front of the altar: a large, stained chopping block. I’ve been to a wide variety of churches for both fleeting devotional and anthropological purposes, but this is a first for me. I don’t hide my surprise well.

“Holy sh-”

“Ya, holy. Dats what it es.” Michel cuts me off before I can complete my profanity. He can see my curiosity, so he explains. “Holy to all. Monday, Wednesday, an’ Saturday, he Vodou houngan. Tuesday, Friday, an’ Sunday, he Santería priest.”

“What is he on Thursdays?” I ask.

¹⁰³ It’s a good thing you’ve never read Plato... or Nietzsche closely for that matter.

Michel points to the hydraulic lift beneath our feet. “Thursday, he auto mechanic. I go wake him.” With that, he slips through the back door.

The second he’s gone, I’m trying to get Milac out of there, but he’s engrossed in the detail work around the altar. This place has me freaked, and the chickens must sense something as well because they’re clucking up a mighty din where Milac left them by the door. “Dude, this is totally not safe. It’s not a good idea to spend too much time with strangers who make a practice of killing things in their garage.”

Milac doesn’t even look at me. “What’s the big deal? We purchase animal sacrifices every day just to please our palates. These folks do it to please gods, and they do it themselves. We can at least have the decency to watch.”

“I prefer my sacrifices slightly more processed, preferably into bite-size nuggets that come deep-fried and with honey-mustard or barbeque sauce.”

“Here’s a bite-sized piece of advice.” He still doesn’t look at me. “If a man comes thousands of miles to a new land, and he finds something that makes him feel a little like home, even if that something makes you a bit uncomfortable because your home suddenly feels a little less familiar, you might not want to treat him as though you think he’s a fucking savage.”

This shuts me up.¹⁰⁴

Seconds later, Michel returns with a man that looks exactly like he does. Now I don’t mean that they’re both tall, skinny, and black. And I don’t mean they look related, or even like they might be brothers or twins. They are exact doubles,¹⁰⁵ right down to the

¹⁰⁴ A surprisingly difficult task. I’m glad faux indignation and offense did the trick.

¹⁰⁵ Pointing out the obvious link between religion and commerce again? Yawn.

level of stubble on their unshaven chins, the angle of crooked alignment of their remaining teeth, and the pattern of dirty smudges on their matching white shirts. The only difference I can detect comes from the haze of recent sleep in the priest's eyes and the half-empty bottle of sacramental rum in his hand.

I just stare as Milac, Michel and Michel speak in words beyond my comprehension. The name Asclepius comes up again and again, but they disagree about something for a good ten minutes. Finally, they come to some sort of an agreement, money is exchanged, and Milac hands over the chickens. The Michels begin making their preparations and Milac turns to me.

“What was that all about?” I ask.

“We had to reach a theological compromise. They didn't know a god named Asclepius, so they couldn't make the sacrifice to him. Instead, the entity addressed will be summoned as Saint Asclepius, which I figure is close enough.”

Michel number one then locks the door behind us, which signals the beginning of the actual ceremony.

The next half hour involves a lot of chanting, a little dancing, simple drumming, lots of candles and incense, and several ritually proscribed swigs from the aforementioned bottle of unlabeled rum. By the time we get to the actual sacrifice, I'm less apprehensive but a little queasy and rather dizzy.

When Michel number two reaches for the first chicken, the creature is surprisingly quiet. With one large, practiced hand, he restrains the bird's wings and presses it against the altar while his other hand slices the head off with one smooth chop of a cleaver. Bile crawls up the back of my throat as I watch him quickly drain the blood

out of the pulsing, feathered corpse and into a ceremonial vessel. When this is done, he hands the used bird to Michel number one to hold for the rest of the rite. When he finishes up with the second chicken, he hands it to Milac, and I start to worry. Sure enough, the third empty, headless chicken gets placed in my hands, still twitching, and I struggle to keep my grasp as its muscles continue to contract and release. I try to ignore the living warmth slowly cooling in my hands and watch the priest. He mixes the blood with the remaining rum and offers a small amount to each of the images that line the room's walls. He's just returning to the main altar when the decapitated fowl in my hands begins to powerfully convulse. Not wanting to lose my grip, I squeeze it even tighter, and like an idiot, I look down at it just in time for a final gush of warm blood to spray out of the severed artery and cover my entire face.

That's when I pass out.¹⁰⁶

It's evening now, and we slowly smoke the cigars that we watched old Cuban men roll that afternoon at a store-front factory on Calle Ocho in Little Havana. For the bulk of the day, Milac has let me decide what we should do as an apology for an admittedly traumatic morning, so as the evening progresses, we enjoy the rich tobacco, sip on mojitos, and pretend that I don't still smell like the inside of a dead chicken.

The two of us sit on the patio of a bar on Ocean Drive and watch the South Beach parade of loud music, shiny cars and supple flesh pass before us. Although getting here took only minutes – a quick few miles over the MacArthur Causeway – the neon pink

¹⁰⁶ The priest was convinced that Saint Asclepius had taken possession of your body and was rather miffed when you wouldn't tell him about his cousin's eternal disposition in the hereafter.

bubblegum glitz of Miami Beach feels like a different planet than the pervasive semi-destitute Third World grunge that hangs on the city proper. Here the booze, the bikinis and the well-oiled bodies sing out in a pastel visual swirl that strokes the cerebral cortex into believing that every desire lies at the tip of your fingers, waiting to be grabbed.

“People come here for this,” I say, pointing out at the stream of the scantily-clad and well-endowed. “To gawk. To taste. To become.”

“This isn’t why Michel Rouge came here,” he replies.

“No, he came here so he could eat.”

Milac fingers a tail-feather that he saved from the morning and takes a long pull from his cigar. “He came here to find his home. When one place stops being home, you try to find it somewhere else, but you always bring a piece of it with you.”

“Is that a fact?”

“No. Just a common, successful strategy.”

We sit in silence, listening to the crowd, until a trio of beautiful women walk past. It’s not until they’re within five feet that the breadth of their shoulders, the shape of their jaws, and the protrusion of Adam’s apples (among other things) makes their blended biological gender identities obvious. Still, they are stunning, and Milac admiringly watches them continue down the street.¹⁰⁷

“And what some people look for in a home is slightly more complicated than others. But here, perhaps they too can find it.” He downs the remainder of his drink.

“It’s wonderful, sure, but this isn’t the real America, Milac. This is some sort of hedonistic day dream gone wild. In this subtropical heat, everything thrives. This city is

¹⁰⁷ Tits and cock. What could be better?

a petri dish, awash and swarming with hard drugs, meaningless sex, complete depravity, and violence that knows no end.”

“Sounds about as authentic as a city can be.” Milac smiles, getting drunk. “If this place is actually that different, then it’s the real America that’s fake.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Did I say that? I doubt it, somehow. I was rather drunk, but even in liquor, I’m usually a bit more eloquent than that. And the falseness to which I meant to refer was one on the level of ideas, of forms, of consistently applied conceptual frameworks, for what is a freedom that doesn’t embrace the hedonism it allows other than a empty promise or a hypocritical lie?

We’ll have more chance to discuss this in the future, I think, but you’re stirring from your sleep, so I better put this back. I look forward to our continuing drive...

TX-MX

Under the harsh, late afternoon light, El Paso presents itself as merely half a city. The tilting landscape that rolls everything down to its political edge – the razorwire-lined river-cum-concrete drainage ditch known as the Rio Grande – leaves the other side unhidden from every point and perspective in town. The evil twin, the unfortunate cousin, the unwanted ugly step-child, and the necessary counterpart to this urban corner of the lone star republic – beneath a flag of red, white, and green, Ciudad Juarez stretches out in all its decrepit wonder to the small ridge of hills that vainly attempts to balance the valley.

El Paso may not be much to look at itself, with its meager desert buildings of tan and gray, but compared to the dark browns, the charcoals, and the crumbling black of the shacks and low-rises that blanket the dusty opposite bank, it's a veritable paradise on earth.

One city.

Two nations.

Two worlds.

Two border towns.

One border metropolis.

Yet even from the interstate, it's easy to see that the bridge across the river is jammed with traffic, with people, with hope,¹⁰⁹ heading in both directions.

“What is this place?” Milac asks upon waking from a slight doze.

¹⁰⁹ You should work for Hallmark.

“A relic.”

I tell Milac that there isn't much to see in a town like this, but he insists that we drive around it anyway. So we wind our way through the dry, nondescript streets, and sure enough, there isn't much, but the single landmark that we keep running into is the curving sharp backbone that runs through the center, that ties together, that keeps apart the asymmetrical halves that constitute the town. The border really is all there is to see in this place, and as such, it is constantly watched. By men with guns. We spot the Border Patrol vehicles almost every time we see the border. They rove up and down this side of the river – watching, waiting, aiming.¹¹⁰

When we find a spot, we stop and look out at the wide band of slow, gray-green water, fenced off on either side. A seemingly inexhaustible mishmash of garbage floats in the water, from plastic bags, to car tires, to a much-abused leather loveseat. I wonder just how far that piece of furniture has traveled downstream, or what motivated someone to get it all the way over the fence? Then the smell of the river hits me – the human odor of waste and bacteria – mixed with the fumes of exhaust and industry that waft across from the opposite side. That makes me wonder about still other things.

I propose a side-trip across the river, but Milac declines on logistical concerns.¹¹¹ He's not sure how legal his papers really are. Old Milton helped him into the country in New York with local connections and a makeshift Turkish passport, but that might not

¹¹⁰ Or maybe you could get a job writing dialogue for a day-time soap operas.

¹¹¹ And I've seen enough Third World poverty, thank you.

work here, and Milac doubts that the immigration officials on either side of this border have ever even heard of Nacirema. I'm inclined to assume he's right.

"How about a little Mexican food, then?" I ask.

"You know a place?"

"No. I've never lingered here. But it shouldn't be hard to find a good one. We just look for a place where they only speak Spanish."

"In the hour that we've been in this town, I haven't heard a word of English yet."

"Then it should be even easier."

It is easy to find a place. In fact, the Romance language pours out of every restaurant, shop, and store that we drive past. We settle on a spot with a crowd and a full bar, and the warm, simple food makes the accompanying tequila taste smooth and tender. By the time we finish, it's nighttime again, my eyes won't stay open, and I'm very glad there's a cheap motel just three blocks down the road.

In the morning, I wake up before Milac. To clear the cobwebs and stretch the legs, I mosey down the block and back. As I pass my car for the second time, I notice the pool of liquid running out from underneath the front. I drop to the concrete and, sure enough, there's a slow drip coming out of the engine block. It doesn't smell like gasoline, but has a nauseatingly sweet aroma – antifreeze. I pop open the hood out of misguided sense of masculine obligation, but as the relatively simple maze of parts stares up at me, I remember that I don't know shit about cars (among other things).¹¹² Still, that

¹¹² These rare moments of insight and honesty bother me more than all your babbling drivel. How can you be so utterly clairvoyant in demeaning yourself at one moment and yet completely clueless in your attempts at profundity in the next? How human.

drip looks serious, so I ask the guy watching Telemundo at the front desk about a mechanic, and in broken English, he sends me around the corner and up two blocks.

When I find the place, the tires and fenders and hubcaps and auto bits and motive pieces that surround the open front door make it look more like a junkyard than a garage. Inside, a short dark man, with a tight, stern face, leans back in a plastic chair, also watching Telemundo. He doesn't smile when he sees me, but the long, weary expression seems set into his jaw and the somber eyes look as though they've been that way forever. The signs outside are all written in Spanish and he doesn't reply when I just say, "Hello," so, like the jackass that I am, the first full sentence that I say to this guy is, "You speak English?"

The look on his face registers nothing, but he pauses before replying, "*? Cómo se dice*, 'Go fuck yourself'?"

"I see. Sorry about that." I'm about to turn around, but I hesitate. Something in his calm reassures me. "Are you actually pissed off?"

"No. I'm just fucking with you, man." He stands up and shakes my hand. "The name's Miguel Rojo. What you need?"

"Mike Redmond. Nice to meet you. It looks like my radiator's leaking."

"Bad news in the desert."

"Can you fix it?"

"What kind of car you got?"

"A '77 Mancha Rosinante."

“No shit? I drive a Mancha Rosinante, too. You sure the radiator’s all that’s wrong with it? Something breaks on mine every week. Good thing for you, though. I can fix a Rosinante in the dark. I have a few times.”

“Wait a minute... you drive a 1977 Mancha Rosinante?”

“I donno the year, but it’s a Rosinante.” He eyes me like I’m crazy. “Not like the year matters. There’s only one model.”

“Yeah, but ’77 was the only year that Mancha Motors existed. They only produced five hundred Rosinantes. Then they folded. It’s like one of the rarest vehicles on earth...”

The creases that line the mechanic mouth arch slightly at their ends. I think this is his version of a smile.

“What?” I ask.

“It’s true – Mancha Motors made only a few hundred Rosinantes, and if yours is an original run, that’s rare... but when the company collapsed, the factory didn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mancha Mexicana was government funded. Officials don’t admit mistakes. The assembly line, the machines, everything got mothballed, not dismantled. And every couple years somebody tried to make it work again, got government money or raised their own, started up the factory and knocked out a couple thousand more Rosinantes, only to fail ‘cause nobody wanted them. Two decades passed like this. Then they sold the place to investors who cut production cost in half, marketed the cars as ‘retro,’ and sold sixty thousand Rosinantes in the first six months. It’s now like the third most

common car in Mexico. Which means I won't never be short work. I love mine, but the things ain't built for shit."

"Are you serious?"

"Look out back. See for yourself." He points my gaze through a broken screen door, where I can see at least four and a half Rosinantes in various states of disrepair.

"You don't see too many stateside, what with emissions and shit, but I got parts enough to build you a whole new engine if you need it. Got two or three radiators."

Suddenly I find I have difficulty breathing. The air just feels thinner and I grab the wall to steady myself. I've been disillusioned before, but this is a stab in the back. That car is a character, a story, a friend, and then to find out that all this time I've been driving a lie. My sweet Rosinante, how could you fail me like this? Performance failures I knew when I bought you. Mechanical failure I've come to expect. But nothing could have prepared me for betrayal of the metaphysical sort.¹¹³

My knees begin to wobble and Miguel notices.

"Jesus, Mike, something wrong? You need to sit down? What's the matter?"

"How much you pay for your Rosinante?"

I shake my head and brace myself. "Twenty bucks."

"That sounds about right. Where's she at?"

"Just down the street..." I whisper, "...I'll be right back."

¹¹³ You've created this betrayal, practically this whole relationship with your car, and portrayed its development, its arch, its sudden deterioration – why? Nobody cares about your obsessive fascination with what you thought was an automotive masterpiece. Is it supposed to stand in for something else? Are you discussing your split with this idealized Rosinante because you can't bring yourself to mention the rift that you know grows deeper between yourself and that girlfriend of yours in New York? Why do you hide? What good can it do? What emotional pain do you hope to spare yourself?

When I get back to the motel room, Milac is awake, sitting on the edge of one of the beds, watching Telemundo.¹¹⁴ He doesn't even look away from the screen when I walk in the door.

"The car is leaking," he says at the commercial.

"I know, but I found a guy to fix it." I let myself fall on the other bed. "But there's much worse news."

"The '77 Mancha Rosinante is not the endangered automotive species that you previously believed it to be?"

"Yes. Christ. How did you know?"

"I saw more than a dozen of them yesterday, mostly on the other side of the river. I didn't want to say anything, but I figured a mechanic would tell you."

"Why didn't I notice? How could I have been so oblivious?"

"We only see what we want to see, Michael. And the car out there means something to you."

"I thought it was unique. I thought that it was special."

"Your car is special. It is unique." Milac finally bothers to look directly at me. "Just like everybody else's."

We spend the rest of the day hanging out at Miguel's shop, drinking beers and trading stories while Miguel replaces my Rosinante's tattered cooling system (and a few other items on the verge of disintegration). Milac tells the mechanic the story of the roots

¹¹⁴ Congratulations, Michael. You've just adequately followed the comic rule of threes.

of my tragic faith in Rosinante, but he does so very quickly, in Spanish, so he thinks I won't understand. Miguel's sympathy is obvious and sincere.¹¹⁵ In consolation for my loss, he informs me that – under very specific conditions – the Mancha Rosinante has the ability to fly.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ This, I believe. Miguel is an incredibly nice guy. He has sympathy for every loss, but he reacted most passionately when you spoke of the girl you left behind. Why won't you write of her? This blankness is insane.

¹¹⁶ I simply don't know what to make of this. Miguel said nothing of the sort. And inventing such a statement can't add to verisimilitude, now can it? Were you feeling too grounded in fact, too close to a perception of truth, too – figuratively speaking – bound to the earth? All of your missteps puzzle me. You leap headlong into fantasy to sidestep simple poetry. What possible theory or aesthetic predilection could guide such a pattern?

What narrative course has your twisted mentality set upon our short shared past...

Driving to Key West at night requires a great deal of confidence in the intelligence and good intentions of my fellow man. The trip consists of one hundred and twenty-six miles of long, dark bridges hovering over warm, pungent, invisible waters that all but envelope the tiny limestone islands that I pray will continue to appear at the end of each span. As I gun the engine into each new stretch that curves up into the black goodnight, I assume that no sections of concrete road are missing, I reckon that the next fifty yards won't send me sailing into a shark-infested coral reef, and I leap repeatedly, placing all my faith in the engineering capabilities and structural integrity of modern construction techniques.

No. I don't find this pleasant.

When we finally arrive at the end of the road – the southernmost point, the zero-mile marker, just ninety from Cuba, the dangly tip of the Floridian wang – my nerves feel as shot as an ounce of spiced rum. It's one in the morning, but that's not a problem in the heart of the Conch Republic. For a little town, a quiet town, a walking town, a sitting town, drinks are available for purchase at any hour of day.¹¹⁷ The challenge is parking. Milac spots a spot that looks at least semi-legal, and I squeeze Rosinante's massive iron frame in between a Mini Cooper and a Vespa, figuring that even if I am towed, the impound lot in a place like this won't be that tough an escape.

¹¹⁷ I imagine you think this loose, rolling prose charming. It's not.

A block from the car, we pass by the slanting masonry/chain-link fence of the Hemingway House, and Milac pauses when he sees the small sign. “Ernest lived here?” he asks.

“Yup,” I say, “and he drank and he fished and he typed standing up.”

“And I bet he’s got a few fans around here.”

“More like a few cults. The worship that the old ambulance driver receives in this town goes well beyond pathetic, somewhere into psychotic. They’d have long ago overrun the whole city and turned it into a Hemingway amusement park, complete with bullfighting rings and trout-fishing ponds, if it weren’t for the rival factions they have to contend with.”

“Rival factions?”

“Yeah, among others, there are the personality cults surrounding Jimmy Buffet and also the large homosexual population. The parrot heads won’t let the Hemingwayites do anything to the city that would alter its island paradise image as evoked in the songs they all know by heart, and the gays, well, they just have reason, good taste, and refined aesthetic sensibilities on their side, but they tend to keep the idiots from ruining places they like.”

“I see.”

“It’s a precarious balance of power, but you can’t argue with success.”¹¹⁸

The island can’t be much more than two thousand yards wide, but we’re on the southern side and the nightlife lurks in the northwestern corner, so we end up walking up

¹¹⁸ Why would anyone want to argue with failure? Success is the one thing with which it is worthwhile arguing. If you are to improve, you must aim at the revered.

Duval Street. Even as we walk through the center of the city, the constant gentle ocean breeze swirls around and caresses our skin – it almost feels like an extension of the saltwater itself, lapping against the edges of the isle, rocking the surface-dwellers into comfortable tranquility. Before I get my first drink, I’m already feeling more relaxed. Milac wears his usual semi-stoic countenance.¹¹⁹

Buying two boat drinks and listening to half a dozen songs at the Margarittaville Café convince my friend that I wasn’t bullshitting him about the Buffet Cults. Being bought martinis by dapper gentlemen and watching grown men dance at three different bars convince him that my take on the queer scene also holds water. And seeing the prevalence of chubby, white-haired, sweater-wearing, whiskey drinkers at Sloppy Joe’s Bar is all he requires to buy into my view on the Papa-loving crowd. Still, although each group has its own strongholds or spheres of near-absolute influence, the omnipresent nature the Jimmy Buffet cover bands, the Hemingway memorabilia, and the friends of Dorothy make it obvious that the human landscape of affiliation is neither as divided nor as distinct as my description made it out to be.

We bounce from bar to bar, exploring the place, enjoying the people, being thrown out of some joints and invited into others. Once the rum really gets to his head, Milac starts flirting with all the middle-aged women and all the guys younger than me.¹²⁰ His refusal to account for husbands and boyfriends gets us mixed up in a couple less than delicate situations, but nothing that my slightly less intoxicated presence can’t

¹¹⁹ Now I’m a stoic? I thought I was supposed to be a maniac in your rendition of life. Admit it – you just don’t know what to think of me.

¹²⁰ I feel as though I should deny this, as well as whatever comes after it, most likely, but in all honesty I can’t recall much of our Key West adventures. Still, I’m sure that you lie.

disentangle us from with only slight bruises. Truth be told, the worst we receive is a splash of frozen margarita to the face, and although the tequila stings my eyes, I'm happy to get clear with so little.

As the ethanol haze descends on my mind, we find ourselves at a tiny little hole in the proverbial¹²¹ wall on Greene Street called Captain Tony's Saloon. The place is crowded, spilling out onto the street, but I'd guess this means only about fifty people, maybe forty-nine,¹²² the place is so small. We sit at a far corner of the dark brown bar, drinking quietly and talking loudly. I'm not sure how we got there.

"Mike." Milac notices first, which testifies to my oblivion. "Mike, I think there's something funny about this place."

"What," I ask, looking around, seeing nothing but men, "we at another gay bar?"

"I doubt it," he replies, "but can't you see something funny here?"

I put down my drink and give the room a good once-over scan. Nothing, so far as I can tell. I turn back to Milac, but he scowls and nods, so I gaze down the bar again, jumping from one face to the next and half way up the line it hits me.

They all look vaguely alike. At least, they look like they're trying to look alike. They range from twenty to sixty, these rugged, hardy men. The younger men are all fit and trim with brown hair and shoeshine and an energy that could take them to hell for a cause, while the older men all carry paunches of varying severity beneath their full mustaches or their tropical beards. They all seem distant, even when they speak, and they

¹²¹ Just inserting *proverbial* somewhere into a cliché doesn't make it not a cliché.

¹²² What's with the obsessive use of multiples of seven? The ancient shorthand for many? The letters in your names? The forgiveness rag again? It's eerie.

all gulp at stiff drinks that serve to mask a silent pain. They're covered in the trappings of countless different professions – from soldiers, to big game hunters, to war correspondents, to sports fishermen, to the ever-present, much-esteemed writers of melodramatically laconic fiction.¹²³

Of course, they all look like Hemingway.

At least, they all think they look like Hemingway.

I laugh so hard when this dawns on me that my daiquiri nearly sprays out my nose. “What the fuck?” I say, when I regain my breath. Milac giggles as well, happy that I'm just as amused as he is.

“I don't know. It's important to be him,¹²⁴ but this is ridiculous.”

“Maybe it's a special event – half-price for Papa, something like that.”

“Ask the bartender,” Milac suggests.

So I signal the barman for another round, and when he brings them over, I ask him what the hell the deal is with the look-alikes. “Is there some sort of convention or festival going on tonight?”

As these words pass my lips, I realize my mistake – the bartender himself wears the fluffy white whiskers, the half-squinting eyes, and the dissatisfied smile of a man who force-fed himself a shotgun shell in his lodge outside Ketchum, Idaho.

“No,” he replies, “everyone here is a regular.”

¹²³ See? You're arguing with success.

¹²⁴ Granted, I have no recollection of this evening, but I very much doubt I'd make a half-assed Oscar Wilde reference in a situation like this.

He must be too polite to add, ‘except you two,’ but I’m somewhat disturbed that he doesn’t. And this mild irritation, this germinating unease, only blooms and grows and spreads as Milac continues to press for information.

“Regulars?” he asks. “All of them?”

“Yes.”

“Then you know everyone in this room?”

“They’re here almost every night.”

“Then tell me, my friend, who is that at the other end of the bar?” Milac points to a man in a knitted Irish fishing sweater.

“Why, that old fellow goes by the name of Mike Redmond.”

“No way,” I say, “that’s my name.”

Milac ignores me and points to a table where two nearly identical members of the Lost Generation sit arguing with one another, about five minutes away from a fistfight.

“And who are those two?”

“On the left,” the barman replies, “is Mike Redmond, and the short one is Mike Redmond – no relation.”

By this point, the silent panic already has a hold of my larynx, but I sit there, watch, and listen as the two clowns in front of me keep up their increasingly unfunny routine.

“And that one?”

“Mike Redmond.”

“And him?”

“Mike Redmond.”

on my sleeve, but then I see my reflection on the wall in front of me, and I start to tremble again. My face looks wider, almost rounded, and my hair is dark and slicked straight back in the style of the fashionable '20s. If I wanted to – and I certainly don't – I'm sure I could pass for a cub reporter working at the *Kansas City Star*.

“What a hell of a way to be wounded...” I say directly into the mirror, but it doesn't really sound like me at all.

Then I head to the toilet and vomit.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Now wait just a minute. You can claim that everyone in the bar is Mike Redmond, you can claim – via Huxley's old Skylark-Slug Formulation – that every person you create in the book is a representation of Mike Redmond, and you can even go so far as to argue allegorically that every aspiring author, whether they want to or not, is in some way trying to be Hemingway.

However! Let me repeat that a couple times for emphasis. However. However, you cannot, you dare not, you shall not include me in either of these categories. I will not be the missing forty-ninth Hemingway/Redmond! I am not your literary plaything. If anything, it is the other way around. I aspire to nothing and you haven't created me. I'm not your writing and I'll never be you. You could only dream of such an honor as to be a part of mine.

Fuck. I wanted to put this down and get some sleep after this chapter, but through this outrage, you've forced my hand. I must know the awful shapes into which you try to twist me...

O.R.

It's good to be back on solid ground, although the ground, when I look at it, isn't really all that solid. Trying to concentrate on something remotely permanent, I mostly stare at my knuckles as they turn white from gripping the armrest. Milac's driving swings the car back and forth across the road, swaying in rhythm with the pulsing in my head, even if he does keep the steering wheel straight, even if the motion comes from my inner ear. I still blame him. What else can I do? We've been heading inland for more than two hours, but the ocean of swamp water and reeds continues to surround us. The thick grass of the everglades stretches out into the distance, and the miserable malleable earth that gives way underfoot doesn't show any sign of firming up soon.

If Milac stops the car around here, I'll probably have to kill him.¹²⁷

When I wake again, the land around the road lies flat and damp in every direction. I no longer feel the danger of sinking that I did in the Everglades, but even here, the constant visibility of water betrays the fluid nature of the soil. Ponds stand everywhere. Streams and gully and creeks and rivulets litter the landscape, spreading a moist and sticky texture over everything in sight. And always, there are lakes. Some of them are small – distinguishable from ponds in name alone – and some are huge – requiring hours of driving just to go around – but they all lurk quietly, nipping at the dirt, forming giant aquatic holes in the patchwork fabric of the tentative and unstable earth.

Hmmmm. Maybe I'm still drunk.

¹²⁷ The homicidal hangover. Hmmmm. That's original.

Nope. The head hurts too much for that.

Just a bad hangover and a worse paranoia. Best not to think about it. Thinking about current pain and fear only increases both. So in hopes of diverting my attention from myself, I concentrate on the ground, which doesn't help my quicksand terrors, but at least it lets me get back to sleep. Kind of.

As we drive through the swamps, the marshes, the jungles, the watersheds, the rich brown mixtures of firm and loose, the thick muck of indeterminate identity that constitutes the heart of the Floridian interior, my addled mind passes in and out of consciousness, never settling on either state, meshing the two in hours upon hours of semi-remembered, fractured dream-day, swarming with notions, perceptions, and incoherent images, and from this protean debris – both terrestrial and mental – anything can pop up into existence. So it does.¹²⁸

The darkness inside my head spreads into the atmosphere and brings on the coming twilight. Most of the color has fled from the sky and a few stars peek out from above the eastern horizon. My thoughts, my attention, and even my vision haven't been reliable for quite a while now, so I must have missed all the road signs, the billboards, the advertisements, the developments, the countless peripheral attractions, enterprises, and commercial hangers-on. Suddenly, a giant fiberglass tree rises up to the left, while to the right I see what appears to be a movie studio mock-up of a movie studio. Then the mighty silver geodesic globe appears in the distance and it dawns on me just what we've stumbled into. It's several more minutes before the tip of the white sub-tropical alpine

¹²⁸ So you conflate Floridian swampland with the existentially non-determined state of human identity and volitional agency, implicitly claiming that this describes them both in a way impossible without such metaphorical gerrymandering. And the result of this manifold quagmire of human givens is nothing more profound than Disney World?

fairytale castle pokes up above the plastic tree line, confirming our presence in the Kingdom that is Magic.

Oh shit.

I look over at Milac – his curious eyes gaze out at the manmade landmarks with an intensity that would run us off the road, had traffic not already slowed to an ever-diminishing crawl. He’s driving us straight into the belly of the rodent. If I let him get to the front gate, we’ll never escape this place alive, but he doesn’t have a clue as to where we’re headed.

I’ve been in this situation before. It’s not a pretty sight.

“I don’t mean to alarm you, Milac, but we’re in grave danger. Turn the car around immediately and get us as far away from here as possible.”

“What are you talking about?” Milac asks. “Thousands of people surround us. This is a giant resort.” He must have read all the billboards that I missed. “And the home of the most popular cartoon character in the world.” And still worse, he believed them.¹²⁹

“But it’s a dead-end street! It won’t let you out. This place is a death-trap, a filling void, a black hole of creative thought that sucks all inspiration into its infinitely dense and destructive mass.”

“What exactly are you afraid of?”

Just then a water tower comes into view, and on top of the elevated, pressure-providing tank stand two enormous, perfectly round, cartoon mouse ears that make the entire structure form the world’s most recognizable trademarked silhouette. “That,” I say

¹²⁹ I believed nothing.

as I point. “They’ve even branded the very water, the source of life. If they could copyright the air, they would. This place is a carefully controlled con game designed to numb the senses, empty the wallet, and lobotomize a significant portion of the brain to help facilitate future wallet emptying.”

“How do cartoons of a high-pitched mouse, a lisping duck, and a mongoloid wolf manage to achieve all that?”

“By themselves, they can’t, but put behind them a ruthlessly machiavellian corporate behemoth of production studios, cable and broadcast distribution networks, amusement parks, cruise ships, hotel resorts, restaurants, retail merchandising outlets, snack foods, and advertisers and suddenly you’ve got a nearly irresistible force.”

“So it’s a fantasyland. They’re selling fantasy and they’re very good at it, which happens to be the businessman’s fantasy as well, but what’s the big deal?”

“They’re not just selling fantasy, they’re cornering the market on fantasy! What Henry Ford was to automobile production, that bobble-headed mouse is to children’s imaginations. He’s formed a vertical trust – a single business entity that controls every aspect of dream production, from the inception of story, to the development of characters, to the depiction of said characters in the public eye – it develops a virtual monopoly on childlike whimsy, and even the audience’s mental associations between the celluloid images and their own physical reality is carefully controlled and choreographed through vacations at brand-specific promotion facilities such as this...”¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Again, you’re arguing with success. Only here, you’re arguing with commercial success, which is the most worn out, easiest, trite little argument in the world. Who hasn’t attacked Disney at some point or another? They’re an easy target to attack for being poor artists, but guess who doesn’t care: them and their customers.

Milac pulls over to the side of the road to take a long, hard look at the unique water tower, but as I refuse to shut up, he begins to stare at me.

“... and the problem is that the stories aren’t entirely bad. In a number of ways, they’re perfect. They’re too perfect – too richly colored, too visually, audibly, and emotionally satisfying – they too completely fulfill the superficial needs that children would otherwise have to create fantasies to meet, they destroy any need for kids to invent nonsense worlds of their own, and in doing so, they’ve crippled the capacity for unique absurdity concoction in an entire generation of Americans!”

“Not just Americans.” Milac lowers a stern lip. “The white-gloved reach of this cartoon rodent extends throughout the globe – even in Nacirema, we had this exact same conversation when I sat on the national board of universal cultural censorship.”

“You were a censor?”

“Yes. We reviewed all influences external and internal on the Nacireman population. If we decided something would harm the country, we banned it so that no one would see it. If we decided that something would benefit the country, we banned it so that everyone would see it.¹³¹ But with the mouse movies and their live-action cousins, we fell to a standstill. The co-opting of the facility of imagination gave us pause, but in the end, we maintained an ambivalent attitude to their overall effects. We figured that maybe it wasn’t so bad that the vast majority of Nacireman schoolchildren be spared the pain of creation, the early knowledge of the arbitrary nature of reality, and the inevitable frustration with their limited internal mental capabilities. I mean, when we thought about our own childhoods, they seemed rather demanding.”

¹³¹ You didn’t so much as blink when I said this. Paradox. Humor. Also, true.

“But how could you let them take these stories for their own – for the only stories they’ll ever have – when you know how empty, how sugary, how utterly vacuous these stories are. There’s nothing of worthwhile substance in them.” The mere thought brings waves of nausea to my stomach. “Even when they do have content, real points, intended meanings, earnest messages, they’re always such bland pleasantries, such obvious Pollyannaisms that they’d do far less damage not existing at all.”

Milac flashes his graying teeth. “But the non-existent and worthless centers of these tales end up providing two invaluable points of cultural cohesion – a canon of uniformly empty childhood myths that an entire nation can reference, and later in life, a shared sense of bitter disillusionment with, of snide superiority to, of existential freedom from those same myths.”

“But most people never get to the second point.” I feel like I’m yelling, but little more than a whisper comes out. If I spoke any louder, I’m sure I’d vomit. “They just wrap themselves up so tightly in the comfortable lies of insipid, toothless fictions that any thought of countering them, of debunking, replacing, or even evaluating them is regarded as a personal assault. As they sink deeper and deeper into the quagmire of blind banality, they fight tooth and nail against any form of disillusionment because the illusion is so damn pleasant.”

“Yet whatever gain is lost by avoiding the second point is obviously compensated for by the increased perceived value of the first. Otherwise, why would they resist so?” With this, Milac shrugs his shoulders in bewilderment. “That mouse has mysterious powers of persuasion... of influence... even, perhaps, of seduction... but if this power makes people happy then you have to acknowledge the good that it does.”

As he finishes this sentence, a tour bus filled with retirees begins to pass us. Through the windows we can see more than fifty octogenarian co-eds with black mouse-ear hats resting politely on their white and silver and egg-bald heads. The wrinkled, sagging skin on their pallid faces bunches into points that form close approximations of smiles, and their eyes follow a bouncing ball on the video screen that leads them in singing with glee a song about how, after all, their world is extremely small.

They really do seem happy.

Milac stares for only a moment before turning to me.¹³²

“How do we get out of here?”

I point down the road in the direction we came from.

“There it is, Milac. Second star to the right and straight on ‘til morning!”

¹³² You thought it was the bus full of singing geezers that turned me around? No. I just didn’t want to deal with the traffic.

IV

“The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate.

“I dont see what that has to do with catchin birds.

“The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I’d have them all in zoos.

“That would be a hell of a zoo.

“The judge¹³³ smiled. Yes, he said. Even so.”

– Cormac McCarthy, Blood Meridian

¹³³ And what do you mean by quoting the judge? Why should this quote appear here? Surely you can’t agree with a man insulted by birds’ freedom. Certainly the author did not. Yet the judge remained the only voice of reason, as flawed and hideous and twisted a reason as it may have been, in a world utterly lacking any sense or compassion, and maybe in this you see a certain parallel to your scenario. That’s pretty pathetic.

P.B.

Milac is not the most subtle¹³⁴ of men.

He doesn't put much effort into disguising his desires, and he has a nearly constant stream of said desires ceaselessly shifting through his mind, looking for some form, any form of satisfaction. This has become increasingly apparent since we hit the beaches yesterday. The Gulf beaches in northern Florida don't feature quite the ridiculous flesh parade that South Beach offered as eye candy, but the innocuous nature of the skin displays that do exist make his leers, his lewd comments, and his earnest offers to perform anal cavity searches with his tongue all the more offensive to their pert little female (and occasional male) recipients.

We've been asked to leave four different establishments here in Panama City Beach already and Milac narrowly escaped a kick to the groin in a fifth. What's worse is that we've only been in town for three hours, and it's currently two in the afternoon.

Miles to go before I sleep. Or something like that.

Now we sit in our sixth bar of the day, drinking the swill beer they have on tap. It's a big, dirty place with a dance floor. I chose it because it looked to be empty and thus relatively safe. Milac agreed to this place because it has a view of the beach from the bar and several sunbathers reside in that view at the moment.

The bartender here looks like one of those guys who never quite made it out of college – thirty-three working on twenty, with thinning hair that's gelled back, old t-shirts that he swore he'd never give up wearing and hasn't, and of course, a job working at a

¹³⁴ Subtlety is like taste. Only those who possess it can ever hope to detect it.

bar that targets college-age kids exclusively for its clientele. He laughs at all the perverse comments that Milac makes about the sunbathers. When the old man offers a detailed proposal for setting up a base camp on the abdomen of a particularly shapely girl so as to facilitate mountaineering expeditions to the north and spelunking adventures to the south,¹³⁵ the bartender has such fits of glee that he feels obligated to buy us a round and introduce himself.

“Thank you much,” I say, “I’m Mike, and this is Milac.”

“Madrigal Rococo¹³⁶, but you can call me Mad Roc. Everybody else does.”

“Really?” I don’t mean to ask this. It just slips out.

“Yeah, for the most part.” Mad Roc directs the rest of the conversation towards Milac, and I can’t say that I’m all that disappointed. “This place may not look like much right now, but it can be the wildest party you’ve ever seen. You all just hit us at the wrong time of year. During Spring Break season, this place is off the hook twenty-four seven with sweet-ass broads that make those out there look like schoolmarms. Nasty chicks, too. You should see the stuff they do, sometimes right on this very bar!” He presses his finger down on the wood grain, and at the same time Milac and I take our arms off it. “But don’t take my word for it. Check out the gallery.”

“Gallery?” Milac’s interest is suddenly piqued.

“We’ve covered the walls of the men’s room with photos of girls that have done crazy shit in this bar, complete with testimonials from the dudes involved. It’s awesome!” I’m feeling a bit queasy, but Milac’s already off his stool and headed towards

¹³⁵ You make it sound crass, but it was all in the interest of science. And very subtle.

¹³⁶ He never mentioned his full name, just Mad Roc. Although, if you really believe that he wrote every line in that bathroom, I suppose this isn’t a bad guess.

the john to investigate, so I'm obliged to follow. Sure enough, the walls are plastered with a few hundred Polaroid images of college girls flashing the bartender, taking provocative body shots, and other such innocent tomfoolery. The accompanying written "testimonials," on the other hand, sink to a level of filth that strains the imagination, and Milac delights in such strenuous mental exercise.

"No higher form of beauty exists than art on the subject of sex."

I look at the scrawled markings on the wall. "You have a very generous definition of what constitutes art."¹³⁷

"Just because a verse is scribbled onto a napkin or scratched into a stall door, that doesn't mean it isn't poetry." He picks out a few lines etched above a urinal near some topless group shots. "For example—"

*If your cock's in a bit of a tizzy,
'Bout the right pussy in which to get busy,
And can't seem to decide,
On which slice to ride,
Just fuck each 'til the spoo comes out fizzy!*

I stare at him for a moment. "I stand corrected. That's both a touching love story *and* sound practical advice. I smell genius. At least, I think that's what I smell. It's also nice to see the kids these days using words like 'tizzy.' Just when I thought the geriatric

¹³⁷ No. Just a strong sense of irony.

crowd had it perpetually trademarked, it makes a triumphant return to the youthful dialect. Now, if we could only rehabilitate the reputation of ‘whippersnapper.’”

“But consider, if you will, the poet’s avant-garde use of the word ‘spoo?’”

“I’m no lingual formalist, and not one to stand on tradition, but I think it’s difficult to see ‘spoo’ as anything but ill-advised.”

“I’m afraid I must concur. But the next will be better.” He scans the wall until he finds a picture of a young, semi-clothed lady dancing on a table. “How about this one—”

*Well, the boys always thought it a fright,
That my folks kept my knees locked up tight,
Then I came to the beach,
And I aired out my peach,
And I boinked seven guys in one night!*

“Amazing,” I say. “A morality play in five lines. That ought to serve as a grave and prudent warning to all the overprotective parents out there... who happen to read the pornographic graffiti on the bathroom walls at this particular beachfront bar.”

“Let’s not make snap judgments about intent. What did you think of ‘boinked?’”

“A believable phrase for a voice that also uses the euphemism ‘peach,’ but a softer consonant set such as is found in ‘boffed’ could better preserve the rhythm.”

“Fair enough.”

“Can you find anything in here that isn’t a limerick?”

Milac looks around. “No.” One of the few fully dressed pictures catches his eye next. It just shows a skinny girl smiling, drinking from a bottle of beer. He reads off the caption from the sheet of notebook paper taped below it.

Said the skank, “I just love giving head,

To the cocks that I bring to my bed.

When I suck down their junk,

They produce so much spunk,

That I’ve never been quiet so well fed.”

“Sort of a Horatio Alger tale,” I say. “Virtue and merit are well rewarded. What’s not to like? It really restores your faith in mankind.”

“You think so?” Milac asks. “I thought it rather cruel.”¹³⁸

Panama City Beach doesn’t offer us many surprises after that. Nor does the eighty mile strip of lovely beaches and chain restaurants that stretches from there out to Pensacola. We stop a few times to get food, to get drinks, to search for more graffiti to critique, but the results are generally disappointing. We agree that Pensacola Beach is beautiful, probably more so than any other beach we’ve seen, but we’ve seen so many by now that we’re sick of them. The old fort at the western tip of the beach begins to get Milac to comment on the aesthetic considerations of military installations, but his heart isn’t in it and he sort of lets it drop. I try to arrange a tour of the Pensacola Naval Air

¹³⁸ It seems to me that, for once, you’ve captured a scene as it happened almost word for word. But the thing that disturbs me is that I nearly suspect you of being serious.

Station, but Milac's non-citizen (of *anywhere*) status causes an irreversible snafu in getting clearance. Instead, we settle into a few drinks at a generic bar just off the base. We mourn the anti-climactic end to the Florida leg of the trip, we think about where we're headed next, and we watch the Navy personnel blow off some steam at the end of their day. We may be the only civilian customers in the bar, but the other patrons – even if loud – are friendly. The rowdy crowd picks our spirits up slightly, but when Milac comes back from the bathroom, he's giggling his ass off. "The men's room was full, so I went in the ladies'."

"And what happened," I ask, "you get laid?"

"Better, my friend. Scratched on the back of the stall door, I found a secret stash of bitter Navy wife poems." He has about twenty copied onto sheets of toilet paper.

"Well, let's hear some." This is a mistake.¹³⁹

*When his ship finally came in at last,
You could say that my sailor was fast,
He had stowed all his gear,
And swabbed his deck clear,
Before bringing my sails to half mast.*

Milac reads these aloud. Perhaps a bit too loud. The room starts to quiet.

¹³⁹ A mistake on your part to let me read them, perhaps. But I knew exactly what I was doing.

*My sweet pilot's missile is hard,
And measures near well on a yard,
And its massive payload
Could just make me explode,
If its speed I could simply retard.*

Everyone else listens as Milac continues, but we don't notice because we're enjoying the limericks. Also, we're tipsy. Also, we're idiots.

*Navy Fly-Boys are certainly keen,
When they move fast, hit hard, and keep lean.
But it seems it's the norm
That they just can't perform
Without a multi-million-dollar machine.*

By the time Milac finishes reading this one, somebody has already sucker-punched me. Apparently military men don't much care for being openly mocked in public. (Who knew?) Nor do they feel too comfortable with beating up on a man of an age that is eligible for Social Security. Thus, I receive the brunt of their dismay at their wives for writing about them with disdain, at Milac for speaking about them with disdain, and at me for listening to the aforementioned disdain in a not-sufficiently-disdainful manner.

Fortunately, this is not the first such event in my travels with Mr. Rasselas and we have a routine escape procedure that covers such situations wherein I cower and try to shield myself from as many blows as possible while he slips out the back and gets the car running to facilitate a quick getaway should I be able to cower my way out the front door.

It's not pretty, but it works.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ There have been few things that have provided as consistent entertainment on this trip as watching you try to get out of the situations I create. That's why I composed the Navy wife poems in the bathroom. That's why I yelled them across the bar. That's why I've done whatever outlandish behavior you've felt fit to complain and resent me for committing. Because I was bored. Because it was fun. You've really no one to blame but yourself. Is there something wrong with fun for the sake of fun? It's not pretty, but it works.

Certain contradictions need to be remembered closely when driving in the state of Alabama – the chief of these being that the farther north you get, the farther away from the port of Mobile, the greater the distance from the calming waters of the Gulf, the deeper and deeper you sink into the Deep South. What does it mean, this trite epithet, this ambiguous insult, this uninteresting description of a place that claims for itself the title of The Heart of Dixie? I don't rightly know.¹⁴¹ But as the towns that the roads pass through get smaller, and the industry gets lighter, and the houses get less painted, and the accents get even thicker, I can feel it. Even if Milac can't feel it. Even if he won't admit it if he can feel it, I feel it lurking in my marrow – the gradual drop in the surrounding economic opportunities, the decreasing mean in the level of education available, and the self-insulating attitudes that both result from and cause the perpetuation of these disadvantages.¹⁴² What does it feel like to me as I pass these all-too familiar dirt farms, these tracts of inaccessible soil, these rich green forests that lie dark and untouched, untaxed, untamed by the generations that have called this place their home? In a word, it feels like danger. But to Milac, it feels like fun.

On a bright and miserable Sunday morning, in the sweltering landlocked midlands of the state, where the rivers are streams and the roads are dirt and half the towns fail to appear on a map, we drive slowly past a rusting sign that welcomes us to Macrobius,

¹⁴¹ Oh, look yonder, Paw. He thinks he's people!

¹⁴² Why worry about cause and effect when you can simply attribute everything to cause/effect? Brilliant rhetorical move, schmuck.

Alabama, population 49. There are no other street signs in this town. In fact, so far as I can tell, there are no other streets. No gas station. No restaurants. No post office. Not even a general store. A few modest, run-down houses dot the side of the road, but most of the residents must live at the far ends of the muddy tire ruts that branch out from the thoroughfare. The central business district, if it could be called that, of this significantly-less-than-one-horse town, exists primarily to fulfill one purpose – it consists of six nearly identical, yet distinctly separate churches.

Their carefully whitewashed fences surround their sober and tidy sanctuaries. None of the structures could possibly hold more than a single room, yet from the open windows of each interior, we can hear the noise of a congregation singing, a preacher upbraiding, or a newly converted testifying. We crawl past the churches at idle speed, windows down, radio off, trying to take in as much of the audio-visual mix as possible. Each establishment declares its independence from and superiority to all other rivals by means of the wooden placard that graces its front gate. From south to north, these signs read as follows:

The First Evangelical Church of Christ

Pentecostal Church of Christ

Church of Jesus, The Evangelist

Church of Christ, The Redeemer

Church of Jesus Christ, The Evangelical Redeemer

The First Evangelical Church of Christ (Pentecostal)

At the far end of this row of picket-fence theocracies, an identical plot stands marked out with stakes and tied off with rope. From the top of a two-foot stump in the

front corner of the yard, a thin balding man in a light gray suit waves a well-worn, leather-bound bible and shouts his denunciations at the other six churches.

“Heathens! Idolaters! False-prophets and non-believers!” Little specks of spittle fly out from his mouth as he tries to overcome the structural and numerical acoustic obstacles his preaching faces. “Repent your sins! Abandon you wicked ways! Crawl out from the clutches of Satan who will drag you down to the everlasting fires of torment and damnation! Come and embrace the one true Church, the only real Word, untainted by false interpretations, modern relativism, or underhanded rationalizations! Rejoice and know that you can be born again and anew in the love and forgiveness of the only Son of God. Come foul sinners and help me build The First Macrobius Pentecostal Bible Church of Jesus Christ, The Redeeming Evangelist!”

Without even asking me to stop the car, Milac opens the door and steps out. Of course, I jam on the break, park the car and head after him, but by the time I catch up, he’s already knee deep into his conversation with the screamer.

“... let me tell you, this here town is a hotbed of sin, seething with pride, wanton coveting, religious unorthodoxies, spiritual perversions, Biblical misinterpretation, and even outright fabrications! A virtual modern day Gomorrah, just asking to have the Lord Almighty’s righteousness to descend upon it with great anger!” The man keeps ranting like this, on and on, while the softer sounds of more muted devotion pour out of the white wooden churches and into the day’s early sun. Eventually, Milac interrupts him.

“So that’s why you want to build a church?”

“No, my good man. I am just an empty vessel. It matters not what I want. Desire has nothing to do with my holy mission, my sacred calling, my edict from the demands of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Yet still it is I, the lowly and humble servant, Reverend Midrash Revelations¹⁴³, who shall bring forth-”

“What’s wrong with the other churches?”

“Let me ask you a question, friend. As you drove up the road in your fancy foreign car, did you happen to notice the names of these impostor churches? Did you happen to see that they each claimed to praise the Holy name of Jesus Christ? Yet, I ask you, did any one of them have the word ‘Bible’ in their name?” He shakes his head.

I have to think for a minute. “No.”

“Don’t you find it strange that they’d praise God and yet fail to praise his Sacred Word?” The Reverend nods his head vigorously waiting for us to respond.

“Um. No?” I ask. Rev. Midrash doesn’t listen.

“And I’ll tell you why they don’t! They don’t believe in the True Word of God. Not like they should. Not like I do. Not like everyone will in The First Macrobius Pentecostal Bible Church of Jesus Christ, The Redeeming Evangelist!”

“So the other churches don’t believe in the literal truth of the bible?” Milac asks.

The man looks down on us with abject horror upon his face. “They don’t even worship the real Bible!” He starts waving his hands, working himself up in a holy heat. “The heathens at the First Evangelical, they use Today’s English Bible! The charlatan holy men at Pentecostal C of C use the New English Bible. The C of J, The E uses the

¹⁴³ If by giving him a name that combines the well-reasoned commentaries of the older tradition with the most schizoid and fantastical book of the new, you simply intend to highlight his insanity, the utterly illogical contradictions of his thought, let me point out that no such emphasis is necessary. The man is clearly a whack job.

New International Bible, if you can even fathom it! The purveyors of half-truths at the CCR swear by the American Standard Version, and the CJC, the ER, split off from them when they decided to wallow in the indulgent Revised Standard Version.”

“What about First Evangelical (Pentecostal)?” I ask.

“Those simpletons started up when a snake oil salesman came to town, peddling The New Revised Standard Version.”

“Pardon our ignorance,” Milac says, “but what is the rationale that determines which of the competing vernacular translations is the perfect and inerrant Divine Word of the Lord?”

“That, my friend, is simplicity itself.” He smacks the volume he holds in his hand for emphasis as he says this. “Like the bumper sticker says, ‘If ain’t King James, then it ain’t Bible.’”

Milac’s jaw drops slightly. “It is impossible to attack the logic in that argument.”

“That’s what I been telling this town for the last two years, and-”

“I mean you can’t attack what isn’t there-”¹⁴⁴

“Shut up, Milac,” I whisper, but Rev. Midrash Revelations hasn’t heard a thing.

“-and the hardheadedness of the residents of Macrobius only gets worse when it comes to clear cut issues of Biblical interpretation! You wouldn’t believe some of the inventions, allowances, and clear kin to witchery that some of these mini-papacies claim have Biblical precedent.”

“Like conjuring, incest, murder, and genocide?”

¹⁴⁴ I would never explain myself in this fashion. Who footnotes their conversation?

“How’s that?” The preacher cups a hand to his ear, as if he must have misunderstood what Milac just said.

“Nothing. So, tell me, who does decide proper Biblical interpretations?”

“Only the most highly trained Biblical scholars.”

“And where do they learn to interpret the Bible?”

“From detailed studying of the Bible.”

“And who interprets their interpretations?”

“A true interpretation needs no interpretations.”

“At least, that’s your interpretation.”

“Yup.” In earnest, Rev. Midrash nods his head, which is poorly attuned to irony.

“I see, thank you. You’ve been a big help.”

For the rest of the day, we drive quietly. Macrobius isn’t the only church town we come across, but it certainly is the most memorable. Still, every time we pass by another set of rival Christian congregations, Milac cringes visibly.

“What’s the matter?” I ask. “Doesn’t Nacirema have religious squabbling?”

Milac looks somewhat nauseous. “For thousands of years, we had no religion to speak of. It never really came up. It wasn’t important. But for the last half a century, we were under Communist rule. So the Soviet state officially banned all religion, just in case we were planning on developing one. Instead, they made the state itself a religion – complete with a Chosen people (the proletariat), a God the Father (Marx), a God the Son (Lenin), and a Holy Spirit (Stalin).”

“And that caused trouble?”

“Not at first. At first we said fine, and went about our business. And the political commissars left us alone. They would make the journey over to us once a year, take a third of our crops and leave us in peace, and that was fine. But they also left us copies of their sacred scriptures. Among others, they left *Das Kapital*, *The Communist Manifesto*, *What Is To Be Done?*, *Imperialism – The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, and of course, *Marxism and the National Question*.”

“And reading the books caused trouble?”

“No. The trouble started when we actually took those damn books seriously. That’s when we started questioning everything. Why did the best farmers get more food? Why did some men get prettier wives? And why, exactly, did the commissars take a third of everything every year?

“Upon their next arrival, the first response the state officials gave the mob that greeted them was a loud cocking of their machineguns, but when they saw that we wielded only books and demanded only answers, they calmly explained that everything was the way it was because Stalin said so. Now that was all well and good, but how were we to believe that Stalin said so when the sacred books didn’t say that. So they promised that when they returned, they’d bring Stalin himself to confirm this.

“And sure enough, the following year they brought a tall Russian with a thick mustache and a military uniform who sort of looked like the little pictures of Stalin they had given us. This giant man of steel decided all of our arguments for us, drank our best vodka, bedded down with a virgin, and left the next day.

“And every year after that, the commissars always brought Stalin along with them. It wasn’t always the same Stalin, but the resemblance to the pictures was always

close enough. We didn't press the issue. We were happy just to have definitive answers to our questions.

"For more than five decades, it went on like this until just seven years ago. It raised a few eyebrows when the commissars brought us a Chinese Stalin, but even this could have passed if his mustache hadn't fallen off.

"Only then did we learn that Stalin was dead. That he'd been dead for four dozen years. That the Soviet Union didn't even exist anymore."

Milac shrugs and looks at me.

"Suddenly the world made a lot less sense."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ The loss of a god, through death or enlightenment, is always a painful and dangerous event. I don't envy anyone who must go through this, and I wish that I hadn't lost so many.

But the hour is late, and we'll drive much tomorrow, so I bid you adieu until I peek once again...

“Where are we?” Milac asks, a hint of fear in his sleep weary voice. We’ve been driving through the back roads of Arizona for two days now – skirting mountains, crossing sands, exploring reservations and narrowly avoiding forest fires – but he’s been curled up unconscious in the back seat for just the last four hours. When he zonked out, we were cruising through the irrigated suburban wonderland of the sprawling Phoenix subsidiaries, the chilled blue reflection of the harsh desert sun off a million above-ground pools lulling him into slumber, but now, a mere moment in his perceptual experience later, he sees twisted cedar and juniper trees all around the road, spreading out and up, their dark green tuffets standing in contrast to the bright orange and blood-red rock formations that soar hundreds of feet into the cloudless azure sky above them, forming natural obelisks in every direction. “What is this place?” he repeats.

“Sedona,” I reply, “one of the most visually unique towns in America. I don’t think there’s a single place to stand where you can’t see those sheer stone mountainsides. They’re pretty stunning, no?”

“Why are the rocks bleeding? The deep red color in the mountains – why is that?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” I say. “Probably a high iron content in the stone – when the surface it exposed, it oxidizes and rusts and you get a drippy red paintjob all across the skyline. Enough iron in the ground and in the surrounding hills can also do odd things to electromagnetic fields, which might explain some of the strange phenomena.”

“Phenomena?” Milac wakes up entirely for this. “Like what?”

“That depends on who you ask. The only thing I’ve ever seen is a thoroughly messed up compass, but there are people who claim to have witnessed lights in the sky, otherworldly beings, vortices of elemental energy, animal transformations, healing gemstones, and portals to alternate dimensions. You name it. There are a lot of nutcases in this town.”

As we roll into the center of town, the storefronts confirm my semi-jaded perception. The paranormal establishments outnumber the conventional by about three to one. Most of the signs offer specific services like vortex tours, crystal alignments, charka balancing, tarot card readings, past-life regressions, karmic analysis, or aura photography. But a few are more all purpose like the Elemental Advisors, the New Age Temple, or The Spirit Depot of Ancient Wisdom. Even the convenience store adds “Mystical” to its name in an attempt to blend in.

“You weren’t kidding,” Milac mutters.

I’m trying to figure out if any of these places actually sells food when Milac points to a shop half-covered by a mural of ecstatic naked women dancing around a giant crystal ball.¹⁴⁶

“There.” Milac points repeatedly. “We have to go there.”

The hand-painted sign on the door tells us that this particular business is known as The Center for New Age Spiritual, Emotional, and Aura Rebirth, and when we walk in a recorded chime plays a five second melody that might accompany a dream sequence in a low-budget movie. Inside, the center of the floor space is devoted to prayer rugs and yoga mats. The walls, the shelves, and a variety of tables and display cases stand covered

¹⁴⁶ Like I said before, I’m a sucker for tits and balls.

with symbols, tools, books, and implements, with talismans, prayer wheels, idols, and candles, with dream catchers, wind chimes, amulets, and incense, with wands, masks, totems, and ceremonial drums, with every piece of metaphysical paraphernalia possible from almost every cultural tradition under the sun, from Tibetan tantra to Nordic runes, and all of it, every article, down to the very last item, is for sale. And yet even with such incredible diversity of inventory, a full one third of the store is devoted to the peddling of cheap quartz crystals at ludicrous prices.

Milac entertains himself with some of the more esoteric fertility charms, and I paw through the displays of shiny pieces of the second most abundant mineral on earth – some of which are priced at over a thousand dollars. We both sort of chuckle to ourselves as we survey our surroundings, but all laughing stops when an anorexic-looking young man with a shaved head, a two foot long beard, and the flowing robe of an Inuit shaman comes prancing, literally prancing, there's no other word for it besides prancing, into the room.

“Welcome to my home, kind brothers! Is it not a most glorious day today? How may I be of assistance to either of you on your particular internal, interpersonal, or interstellar quests?” Neither one of us speaks. We can't. So he continues. “My spirit name, conferred upon me by the mighty wholeness when I attained my present level of enlightened balance, is Mawlawiyah Rumi.¹⁴⁷ But you can call me Brother Matt. It's easier to pronounce.” He smiles at both of us expectantly.

“Milac,” Milac says, pointing at himself. “Michael,” he says, pointing at me. “What's with the rocks?” he asks, pointing to the tables full of quartz.

¹⁴⁷ Why do you label him a whirling dervish? There was little about him that spoke to the Sufi tradition, unless you intend to lump all mystics together. Very refined.

“These are no mere rocks, friend, but specially charged crystals taken from some of the earth’s most powerful energy centers which allow their possessors to transform and conduct energy according to their need. Pyramid crystals to amplify and focus positive energy, spheres to gaze into or share your power, and crystal clusters to help dissipate the negative energies that plague us through all levels of existence.”

“So your theology is based on geology?” Milac grins.

“Oh, Brother Milac, you are a wit, but that would be like saying the sacred art of astrological analysis was based on mere astronomy. Now wouldn’t that be silly? We’ve known that these things – the stars, the elements, the energy all around us – we’ve known that they effect us since the dawn of time. Primitive man, long before any science or technology, long before books or learning, he believed these things, and my purpose it to help remind us of his knowledge.”

“Primitive man had an excuse,” Milac replies, “he didn’t know any better.”

“You have so much negative energy, and that pains me to see, on a spiritual level. I just feel like I could really open my heart and my energy up to you, that I want to help your cleanse your energy, that I need to help you, that as a fellow living feeling sentient being, I’m obligated to strive to help you open up to the beauty that is within your own soul.” Brother Rumi places a loving hand on Brother Milac’s shoulder. “And I can do it all for a very reasonable price.”

Then Milac punches the robed gentleman in the face.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ It is often said that what we hate most in others is that which we see in ourselves. I may be a fraud, a con, and a vulture, but I don’t prey on other people’s desperation like this guy. I prey on lust, pride, and pretension. There’s a difference. Or so I like to think.

To get out of Sedona, we head north through the Oak Creek Canyon towards Flagstaff. The farther we get into this narrowest of all possible valleys, the higher the heavy cliffs loom above our heads, the denser the forest gets on the side of the road as the juniper transitions into pine, and the browner the green of the needles becomes. The area hasn't had any rain in over two months. A new kind of Asian beetle was inadvertently introduced in February and has left a third of the local Ponderosas as standing deadwood. Perfect tinder. This is what the signs tell me. The signs are posted on the barricades that say all camping, hiking, fishing and driving through Oak Creek Canyon have been temporarily prohibited by the National Forestry Service due to extremely high fire danger. These are the same barricades that we pick up and move and replace behind our car so we can get into the Oak Creek Canyon so we can avoid backtracking fifteen miles through the middle of Sedona where my companion just "brutally assaulted, I think with intent to kill" one of the self-described pillars of the local business community.¹⁴⁹

This is also when Milac decides to start smoking. "I didn't know you smoked."

"I haven't in three decades. I haven't punched a man in that long either."

"I didn't even know you had cigarettes."

"There's a lot that you don't know."¹⁵⁰ He shakes the match to put it out and then tosses it out the window. He continues shaking his hand because his knuckles hurt. Somewhere in the rearview, I can already see smoke begin to rise. Not that the match mattered. Rosinante's muffler has been throwing sparks for days.

¹⁴⁹ The chaotic writing in this paragraph does not convey the sense of panic that we felt in the time it describes. It merely confuses the reader.

¹⁵⁰ This is perhaps the understatement of the year.

The surrounding geography has been kind to Flagstaff, but this kindness does not define it as a city. Every time that I pass through, my impressions are always the same.

This town is real. These people are real. This town has a railroad.

There are mountains nearby. But this is not a mountain town.

A university sits here. Still, this is not a college town.

There exists here just enough of everything wonderful to attract knowing visitors from around the country. Yet through some mad alchemy of not caring too much and having better things to do, this is not a tourist town.¹⁵¹

We get a room at a low-key motel a block from the train tracks that run through the middle of the city. We split a bottle of whiskey at dinner and head for the bars that grace the downtown streets like well-meaning friends. Milac out-drinks me at his usual pace and ups the ante a bit for his trauma. By midnight we've been asked to leave two places, but every so kindly, with apologies and niceness. So I'm guiding/carrying Milac back to hotel, walking parallel to the train tracks, when the sky opens up and the rain just starts pouring. The options are limited in this part of town at this time of night, so I duck into the door of the first bar I see.

Inside the long wood-paneled room, silence reigns. No stereo. No TV. No customers. The only soul present is the bartender – a long-haired girl in jeans and a tight t-shirt, standing next to a small lamp, quietly reading through a chemical engineering textbook. We sit down across the bar from her and order two beers. She opens them and gives us a smile – beautiful – and returns to her book.

¹⁵¹ Still trying to conflate geography with personal identity? Town as surrogate for Sartre's thing-in-itself-and-for-itself? Determination versus freedom in the landscape of the self? You nod at these tired theme repeatedly but refuse to develop them. I guess I should thank you.

“Don’t the drunks bother you?” I ask.

“Not tonight.” She gestures to the empty room. Outside the front window, just a few yards away, a train slowly rumbles past. The noise deafens.

“Don’t the trains bother you?” I yell.

She waits until the volume dies down. “No. I like them. They connect me to the world. I may be in the middle of nowhere today, but tomorrow, I could be in Chicago. I could be in L.A. I could be anywhere. That’s nice to know.”

“That’s almost poetic... almost a romantic yearning.”

“No. It’s real. I don’t yearn for anything. I know exactly how to get what I want. And when I decide I want it, I’ll take it. Hell, I even know how the diesel on an Amtrak engine works. Trains aren’t a mystery to me. They’re just a very reassuring reality.”

“That’s pretty cool,” I say. “My name’s Mike. Mike Redmond.”

“Minerva Roark,” she replies, shaking my hand. “My friends call me Minnie.”

I turn to introduce Milac, but he’s slumped over his bottle, drooling. “That was a friend of mine.” His ears prick up when he realizes I’m talking about him and he tries to focus. “We call him Milac.”

“You know, you’ve got magnificent bosoms,” Milac blurts out before dropping his head face down on the bar.¹⁵²

“Your friend is an asshole.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. At least he’s right.”

¹⁵² I have no recollection of saying any such thing. Therefore I’ll assume you made it up. I do, however, remember waking up on the floor of that bar the next morning and you were nowhere to be seen.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, we'll be heading up towards the Grand Canyon. I haven't talked it up much to Milac. I'm not even sure if he's heard of it. But I know he'll want to see it. It never fails to impress. There's something about the world's largest hole in the ground that just can't be missed. That's what we'll do tomorrow.¹⁵³

Tonight, lord only knows.

¹⁵³ To where did the past week disappear? You've kept me here in Flagstaff for almost seven days while you've pursued that buxom bartendress, and yet you make no mention of this time.

Why do you hide yourself from the reader, Michael? Why don't you tell them of your single-minded pursuit of that beauty, of your crisis of conscience over your friend in New York, of your refusal to call home from this town, and of your lingering dates with your new engineer friend? Don't you think they want to know? Or are you still working under the pretense that this journal is about me?

Even so, you should mention how I'm forced to listen to your blathering about the new girl, your regrets about the old, how I'm entertain myself while you're off entertaining a new found romantic delusion, how I've demanded several times that we keep moving on our trip, and how you've put me off repeatedly until I finally threatened to call Milton if we don't leave tomorrow.

Now I sit in this motel room by myself with a bottle of whiskey, scribbling my notes on top of yours. Tomorrow we leave. Tomorrow we continue. Tomorrow I get you back for myself. But tonight there is one more section of yours I haven't read...

“I didn’t see any sign, but according to the map, passing that last river means we’re in Mississippi.”

“This is Mississippi?” Milac’s voice bounces with excitement.

“Behold it in all its wonder,” I deadpan.

“When Milton first mentioned that I might come to America, this was the one place I most wanted to see.”

“Mississippi? Why?”

“Faulkner wrote about Mississippi.”

“Well, sort of, I guess. He was more writing about the South in general, I think, about the conflict of the old and the new, and through them about the nature of destiny, about the eternal veracities of the human heart, or something like that.”

“No. He wrote about Mississippi. He wrote about the town of Jefferson in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. That’s what I want to see.”

“Well, he lived in Oxford, Mississippi, in Lafayette County, so maybe we should start there.”

“No, he lived in Yoknapatawpha County. I’m sure of it.”

“Um, Milac. I’m not sure how to tell you this, but there is no such place. Yoknapatawpha County is fictitious. It doesn’t exist.”

“Bullshit.” Milac won’t look at me. “That’s impossible.”

“What do you mean? How is that impossible?”

“The Sutpens, the Compsons, the Snopes, the Jones, the Satoris. I suppose these are all just imaginary people? Fictitious families?”

“Well, yes.”

“Nice try, Mike, but it’s not a funny joke. Everybody knows that the kind of detailed psychological insight, the kind of raw emotional reaction and heartfelt anguish that William Faulkner captured in his novels can’t just spring forth full grown like Athena bursting from Zeus’s skull. These were his neighbors, his friends, his family. They were the folks he lived with and knew his entire life. They were his life. They were his people, and he was one of them. That’s the only way that such writing could be possible. And they all lived in and around the town of Jefferson, in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi.” I don’t really know how to react to this, so I just keep driving. Milac has repeatedly proven himself stubborn as all hell, but this cold denial of semi-obvious fact stands out as a new level of childishness, even for him.¹⁵⁴

I toss the road map over to him. “Find me Yoknapatawpha County.”

He studies the multi-colored page covered in lines of various thickness for only a moment. “Find me a better map,” he replies.

“It’s not there, is it?”

“None of the county names are. It has the county lines all drawn in, but it doesn’t tell me what their names are.”

“Shit. How many counties are there?”

He counts. It takes him a while. “Eighty-two.”

“Christ.”

¹⁵⁴ So I’m a literalist when it comes to Faulkner’s writing, even if I’m a fabulist myself.

“We need to find Yoknapatawpha.”

“You have no idea how difficult a task that’s going to be.”

“Tough shit.”

“Fine,” I say, “whatever you want.”

At the next gas station, we find out that we’re in Itawamba County, but the clerk hasn’t a clue about Yoknapatawpha and the station doesn’t sell maps. So we drive south until we hit the old black prairie of Monroe County, and then pass through the cotton fields of Clay. The yellow earth of Lowndes County flies up onto our windows, and the shallow creeks of Noxubee, Kemper, and Lauderdale combined don’t seem to have enough water in them to wash that same dirt off. In Clarke County the trees begin to outnumber the combines, and in Wayne we find forests again. I get the grime off the windshield with a squeegee at a pit stop in Greene, but the attached convenience store lacks navigational aids. The ground is wet and the water is still as we fly through George County without stopping, and Jackson County reintroduces us to the Gulf of Mexico.

At a truck stop outside of Biloxi, in Harrison County, we finally find a Mississippi map that names all of the counties in the state. As soon as he sees it, Milac spreads the map out on the linoleum floor and pours over every single oddly-shaped section. Three times. He can’t find it. I don’t say anything but he can tell what I’m thinking.

“It could be a misprint. There are mistakes on maps all the time.”

“Okay,” I say, and I leave it at that.

“And it could have been absorbed into another county, or split into two, or it may just be too small for this map. Even if I don’t know where, I know Yoknapatawpha County exists.”

Then the old man behind the counter pipes up. “Yoknapatawpha County? I think I heard of that. Up north a ways. Maybe west. Best I can figure.” This response doesn’t help with Milac’s delusion. We keep driving.

We just loop into the corners of Hancock and Pearl River, and then we cut across the various faces of Stone. The yellow pines seem to fill every arable inch of Perry and Forrest and Lamar counties. We dip down gently into Marion County to touch the Pearl River at Columbia before passing on through Walthall and Pike, where it starts to get dark, to the swamplands of Amite, before pushing through to the namesake river, the mighty M herself, at the end of Wilkinson. We skirt the river that we can’t see, up through Natchez in Adams County, then cut back east to Franklin, and stop for the night at a flophouse in Jefferson – the county, not the town.

The next morning I wake up and Milac is already in the car. “Why does it matter?” I still can’t understand. “It exists. It doesn’t. Big deal.”

“Certain books make you believe in things. Others make you fall in love. And a few very rare books are so true, so undeniably real, that they alter forever your conception of reality and how you relate to the world. Mr. Faulkner’s books belong in the last group, not the first.” He looks ahead. “We need to find Yoknapatawpha.”

So we drive through Lincoln, and Lawrence, and Jefferson Davis. Through Covington, Jones, Jasper, and Newton. Neshoba and Leake. Scott, Smith and Rankin. Through Simpson, Copiah, Claiborne, Warren and Hinds. And nowhere does Milac recognize the land he thinks he knows.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ In the richness of empty detail in these superfluous place-names, I suspect a misguided attempt at mockery, a vile implied knock at rambling stylist, at a master of the unexpected and a tester of readers. Or perhaps you’re just a very boring writer.

In Madison, Yazoo, and Issaquena, none of the folks we ask have heard of Yoknapatawpha. The dark fields of Sharkey take us to the alluvial plain of Washington and the backwaters of Bolivar, then back into Sunflower, Humphreys, and Holmes. The green of Attala leads to red clay in Winston, to dust in Oktibbeha, and more clay in Choctaw. Webster County is lonely and so is Montgomery, but Carroll, Leflore, Grenada, and Tallahatchie are lush with growth of both nature and man. The crop land of Quitman takes us to flood lands in Coahoma and more in Tunica before we stop for the night in northern DeSoto, in a distant suburb of Memphis.

The next day brings us Tate and Marshall, Benton and Tippah. Alcorn, Tishomingo, Prentiss and Lee – where every road points to the city of Tupelo, proud to be the one and only birthplace of Elvis. Then Union and Pontotoc. Chickasaw, Calhoun. Yalobusha shows us nothing. And Panola seals the deal.

Finally, with all others eliminated from consideration, Milac lets me drive into Lafayette County, into yellow dust and green pastures, into forests with bears to hunt, into creeks filled with ramshackle fishing camps, into towns with single intersections, into cotton fields utterly lacking topography, into a little piece of home no bigger than a postage stamp in the brilliant haze of the late afternoon sun.¹⁵⁶

Just outside of Oxford, I spot a small sign pointing the way to Rowan Oak. It's a very short drive to the tree-shaded farm house, the workless plantation, the well-preserved home of the great Nobel Laureate. The brown gravel driveway brings us straight past a plaque that in no uncertain terms tells us that this was the long-time

¹⁵⁶ Your insistence, I take it, in these plain as day references, is that the stories came from here even if they were lies. But that isn't enough.

residence of the famous Mr. William Faulkner. Milac reads it, but he refuses to go in. He won't even get out of the car.

"This doesn't mean anything," he says, adamant. "He didn't live here his whole life. And this house could have been moved!"

What the hell? We keep driving and as we get farther into the city of Oxford, the presence of the University of Mississippi campus convinces Milac further that Lafayette County is not, was not, could never have been the inspiration for Yoknapatawpha County. The presence of a Dairy Queen doesn't help much either. We must have missed it somewhere else in the state. I'm at about the end of my goddamn fucking patience.

"Tell me, Milac, what could possibly convince you that Yoknapatawpha doesn't exist? We've seen Faulkner's house. We've seen maps. We've driven through every shithole county in the state! What do you need? A direct revelation from an omnipotent God?¹⁵⁷ You want Billy F himself to rise from the dead and address you personally? What evidence are you looking for?"

"There." Milac points to the main campus library. The old hulking building sits there, innocently. "They'll have an atlas, a history, a something that proves it."

I park the car illegally and we head inside the building. The reference section yields nothing to satisfy Milac. The detailed state-wide survey maps, the legislative record of the last hundred years, and the census results for the last fifty, none of which even mention Yoknapatawpha: these he dismisses out of hand. With every new chunk of negative result, his attitude becomes more defiant and his desperation grows. By the time he goes to ask the reference librarian for help, he's practically in tears. Behind the main

¹⁵⁷ The levels of irony inherent in this sentence intertwine in a way that infuriates me. Your use of my disbelief in one god to undermine my faith in another is unforgivable.

desk, a heavysset Hispanic man in a white linen suit listens patiently to him with an eyebrow cocked and a lip curled. Milac sounds insane, not for his words, but for the speed he says them. “In the archives, do you have governmental records, listings of counties, of those which might have disappeared, have been renamed, things like that?”

“What are you trying to find?” the librarian asks in a thick Southern drawl. His nametag reads Macondo Reportage,¹⁵⁸ and his thick black hair creeps down his cheeks.

“Yoknapatawpha County,” Milac replies. “I can’t find it anywhere, but it exists.”

“Follow me,” Mr. Reportage says, and he leads us up a flight of stairs and into the midst of the stacks. He points to the end of the row in which we stand and says to Milac, “I think you’ll find what you need down there.”

Milac runs to end and starts pulling books out. Copy after copy, he opens each one, and every last book is another novel written by William Faulkner, and in each one Milac sees Yoknapatawpha County, alive and well. As he reads them, as he smells them, as he experiences evidence of that sacred place he loves, he looks relieved, he looks ecstatic, he looks – quite frankly – not entirely well. Macondo Reportage and I watch from a distance as he settles in to read on the floor. Milac finds an annotated map of Yoknapatawpha in the back of one of the volumes and holds it up for me to see. “I told you it existed,” he yells, and then returns to reading voraciously.

“Sorry about this,” I say to the librarian, “but he’s a big Faulkner fan.”

“Don’t worry. I’m used to it.” Macondo gives a resigned smirk. “Your friend is the forty-ninth person to come here on a quest for Yoknapatawpha since January. At this pace, we’ll break the calendar year record of ninety-eight.”

¹⁵⁸ And I suppose this M.R. points to that Colombian spinner of tales who claimed, among other things, that he was a journalist, that he was just telling the truth.

“Jesus,” I say. “Is everyone around here obsessed with Faulkner?”

“No.” His sideburns seem to bristle on his face. “Not everyone.”

“Are you?”

“No,” Mr. Reportage replies, “my obsession is with Elvis Presley. You know, was born in Mississippi too.”

“Yeah,” I say, “I know.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ What you don’t know, Michael, is how much you have hurt me. This denouncement that you’ve written here cuts into my vitals though I read it in the bending light of an intoxicated midnight. Of all the scenes, the bits, and the careless adventures that you’ve omitted through chance and timidity and utter incompetence, you had to include the one that broke me, my one earnest moment, the one escapade in which I violated the sacred rule that has governed my life for almost four dozen years – never be disappointed.

The bottle is empty and so is my heart. Now I’ll return to my own work, to my fire-proof box, in preparation for tomorrow’s festivities. I need to complete it, such as it is, for the road takes us elsewhere in the morning. This will be a long, lonely night...

V

“America? Shit. C’mon – Yup. Still thinking there’s a way to get back. He’s been changing, sure, changing, plucking all the albatross of self now and then, idly, half-conscious as if picking his nose – but the one ghost-feather his fingers always brush by is America. Poor asshole, he can’t let her go. She whispered *love me* too often to him in his sleep, vamped insatiably his waking attention with come-hitherings, incredible promises. One day – he can see a day – he might be able finally to say *sorry*, sure and leave her... but not just yet. One more try, one more chance, one more deal, one more transfer to a more hopeful line. Maybe it’s just pride. What if there’s no place for him in her stable any more? If she has turned him out, she’ll never explain. Her “stallions” have no rights. She is immune to their small, stupid questions. She is exactly the Amazon Bitch your fantasies have called her to be.”

– Thomas Pynchon, Gravity’s Rainbow

G.C.

Judging from his present appearance, I'd have guessed that Milac lost a fight yesterday,¹⁶⁰ not won it. Perhaps breaking the nose of a hundred-eight pound hippy/mystic shill doesn't count as much of a victory – certainly not much of a fight. Perhaps, for a man who's spent years living off his wits, the real battle ended when he threw that single punch. The lines we cross without thinking about them beforehand dictate what we allow ourselves to believe about ourselves. For some of us, anyway.

Maybe he just lost another round in the ongoing bout with a particularly tenacious bottle. Not that I'm one to talk.

I look at myself in the rearview mirror. Unpretty to say the least. My hangover is mild compared to Milac's, but it's just as visible, and almost as well earned. Not sure how last night ended. Met a very nice girl. Lost after that. Blackouts. Amnesia. Conveniently selective memories via alcohol or conscience or instinctive sense of self-preservation.¹⁶¹ Repress that trauma, dull that pleasure, forget the very meaning of what was once the word pain. Absence makes the heart grow. Grow what?

Dead, eventually.

It's not a long drive to the southern rim, but it's one that's both desolate and popular. The narrow asphalt, two-lane road shoots across the high plateau landscape of scrub brush and tan rock and sand the color of wheat, but our Rosinante creeps along at

¹⁶⁰ You play with time. You avoid real emotion. You lie.

¹⁶¹ You coward.

the same crippled pace as the entire line of cars that pushes ever forward to the park's front gate, the one eternally out of sight, just beyond the next ridge. Dotting the row of cars that snakes along this path are the hulking masses of tour busses filled with camera laden foreigners and rusting Winnebagos with bad transmissions and last-wish drivers. The people I see confuse me. The olds, the couples, the families – everywhere I look, in every mirror and every window, I see an almost childlike excitement, even in, of all people, the children. It feels as though we're all headed to an amusement park, or the beach, but instead of a playground, instead of a body of water, instead of a substantial entity of positive enjoyment and entertainment value, we're all headed to a giant hole in the ground.

We drive, we wait, we pay – all of us – all for the chance to look at, to marvel at, perhaps even to crawl down inside that which is not there. This gorge, this void, this monumental lack just draws people in to it, sucks visitors to its edge, pulls eyes upon its emptiness in the same way that all of nature abhors a vacuum. Why? The size plays a role – that's hard to deny. But there are bigger pits. Wider openings. Vast seas and even lakes yawn farther and plunge deeper, but none with the visibility, the transparent clarity of this giant air-filled chasm. And the sheer beauty of this lucid negation pulls us inevitably forward.¹⁶²

But right now our car is at a virtual standstill, and even this movement proves too much for Milac. He pushes open the door and stumbles to the side of the road, falls to his hands and knees, and – in full view of better than one hundred people, at least a third of

¹⁶² You pander to ideas that exceed your comprehension. The internal abyss of the absence of givens cannot be symbolized, be represented, be in any manner discussed through a physical presence. The very attempt evokes scorn.

them children – he empties his stomach of the remnants of booze and accumulated bile in a sickly mixture that soaks quickly into sand. I don't think he's aware of the audience all around him until some jackass three cars back starts honking in a staccato imitation of applause. Milac, hearing this, struggles to his feet, takes a deep bow in both directions, and then slides back into the car. His face remains three shades paler than normal, but even this is an improvement from before his purging. His eyes are puffy, his lips are cracked, his hair is as disheveled as hair that short can get, and his expression reads the half-hearted contentment of a man who's in slightly less pain than he was two minutes ago but expects things to get worse before they get better. I wonder how much stronger his nausea is than mine.

Then he passes out.

As it turns out, parking eludes me in the first six lots that I enter. The crowds pour over the expected capacity of the park and into the roads. Pedestrians make it difficult even to pass by the central area where the lodge, the gift shop, the grocer, the campgrounds, and most of the designated scenic vistas are located. Finding an open parking space in this wide open terrain proves to be an utter fantasy, so I begin driving along the road that follows the rim from a couple hundred feet back. In the car, I get occasional glimpses of the far side of the canyon, but little is visible from this far back.

When we finally reach an open gravel area next to the road that looks like it might be intended for parking, I haven't seen another soul in almost half an hour. I stop the car and shake Milac's shoulder. A small ridge hides the canyon from our location, so he doesn't have the slightest inkling as to what he's about to see. So far my explanations

have been limited to telling him that it's a canyon and a national landmark, but he's so out of it this morning that I doubt he'll remember even that.

“Wake up, Milac, I've got something to show you.”

He shudders into consciousness and opens up the door. He wrenches next to the car, but the lack of ammunition leaves him dry heaving. When he calms himself down, he takes in his surroundings and replies with a simple, “What?”

I grab him by the arm and lead him slowly over the rope fence and up the slightly worn path that brings us to the edge. As we step to the top of the small crest of rock, the panoramic abyss opens up in front of us, plummeting thousands of feet downward, tens of hundreds of yards across, and miles upon miles into the distance on either side. Even I'm shocked at the steepness of the drop at this particular vista, and Milac says nothing but lets his legs crumple beneath him. I catch hold of his shirt and brace myself to keep him from tumbling off, but he just slumps down into a sitting position, his legs dangling over this massive precipice.

“Jesus, Milac, you okay?”

He doesn't respond but just sits there, stone still, his eyes fixed, mesmerized by the view that spreads before him.

“You damn near pulled us both off, buddy.” I crouch behind him, my hand on his collar, just in case. “I know that headache must be a bitch, but there are much more efficient pain relievers out there than a swan dive off a tall cliff.”¹⁶³

¹⁶³ You should not speak of pain that you can't understand. This was a sight I had seen once before, ages ago. Yet the story I tell you, I made up last night.

He turns his head slightly to look at me. He no longer seems blurry or incoherent, but with welling eyes and a crumbling mouth, his expression is one of almost infinite sadness. No words come out. He turns his attention back to the canyon.

“Milac,” I say, as gently as possible, “what’s the matter?”

“Why did you bring me here?”

“To show you The Grand Canyon.”

“Why did you have to show me *this*?”

I look out onto the landscape of the jagged ravines, of the descended Colorado River, of the eroded multicolor rock formations of layered limestone, sandstone, and shale, that graces the front of approximately three hundred forty three billion postcards, and all I can think to say is this:

“It’s the seventh most popular tourist destination in the continental United States.”

“You little prick...”

“What?”

“Except for the colors, they are almost identical. This is the angle from which I last saw it.” Sometimes Milac can be a bit hard to follow. “This is exactly what my Nacirema looked like after...” His voice trails off and he covers his eyes.

He’s already called me a prick and I am pretty curious. “After what?”

“Just after,” he snaps.¹⁶⁴

An hour passes as we sit there on the edge of a desert cliff in the glare of the afternoon sun. Neither one of us says anything.

¹⁶⁴ My best stories, I save, and I hand them out in pieces. You’ll get still more eventually, you hungry little child.

Finally, he stands up and heads back to the car. I turn around and follow him, fully expecting to leave, but when he gets to Rosinante, he opens the door and pops the trunk. Then he goes around back, reaches in and pulls out the gray, metal, fireproof box that I'd completely forgotten was even in there. And as he lifts it out of the trunk, the frame of the car rises up a good two inches on its suspension. He staggers slightly with the weight of the seven and a half by eleven by five inch box, but he heaves it up to shoulder height and gets his back under it. Even then, it's a difficult load to bear, and his legs wobble precariously beneath him as he slowly marches back to the edge.

"What the hell are you doing, Milac?"

He's straining too much to answer right away, but after a step and a breath, he manages to say, "Fuck..." another step, another gulp of air, "... off."

"Dude, don't do anything crazy." He doesn't listen. "You spent weeks on the road, you've spent thousands of miles, you've gone through shit and Shinola just to get what's in there."

He acts like he can't even hear me. He just keeps on walking.

"And it's not just you, man," I yell, "I've put up with an awful lot to help you put that all together."

He ignores the very fiber of my being.¹⁶⁵ He continues his trudge to the edge.

"You better not even think about throwing it away!"

No response comes other than the constant steps towards the giant gap. When he reaches its side, he places the box on the very boundary between earth and sky. He takes the small key from a chain around his neck and unlocks the box.

¹⁶⁵ Can you possibly be serious?

“But what about the story, Milac? *The American story?*”

“Fuck it.”

“How can you say ‘fuck it’ to the story that makes a people?”

In reply, he pulls open the lid, and I just have time to see the top leaf – a title page marked with the letters “B.S.” – flutter in the breeze before he tips the box onto its side, dumping its contents out into the massive ravine. The sheets pour out and down, catching the wind, tumbling over rocks, swirling everywhere, forming a stream that just never seems to stop, an endless snow of flakes of manuscript, a cascading waterfall of paper leaping out of this tiny metal rectangular cube. And this emptying doesn’t stop. It doesn’t even slow. The torrent of paper spilling forth just goes on and on and on. The pieces keep coming, keep falling, keep dancing towards the distant river thousands of feet beneath us. Eventually the volume reaches such a peak that the wind and the water can’t carry them away as fast they arrive and the bottom two levels of the canyon floor fill up to their brims with the billowy sheets of pristine white cellulose, all of them almost completely blank.¹⁶⁶

The sun begins to set to our left, and the sheets finally putter out. The last few seem to jump out of the box of their own volition, chasing after their friends that now coat the scenery in a pile that must reach well into the hundreds of millions. Milac picks up the box, shakes it to make sure it’s empty, and then dropkicks it far into the canyon where its distant crash is cushioned and muffled by its former contents. I stare at him, now that it’s over, and I can’t stop thinking about Milac’s last words.

“Fuck it?”

¹⁶⁶ Excellent hyperbolizing. Perhaps I’ll make a magical realist of you yet.

Milac turns to head back to the car. “Don’t fuck the story. Just fuck writing it. If I find the American story, I’m not going to tell a goddamn soul. I’m just going to live it. Like everyone else.”

When we’re back in Rosinante, we head west for Nevada.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ As I read this, things do not look good. You’re still on the phone with your girl in New York, and I bide my time while you listen to your life fall apart. We just got into town, but our party has not yet begun. Soon enough, though, I’m sure, soon enough...

L.V.

“What’s there to be said about Las Vegas that hasn’t been said already?”

“Nothing.”

Except what we did there.

We drank.

We gambled.

We placed bets on loose women.

We lost.

You fill in the rest.

We certainly tried to

D.V.

I'm driving now, as poor Michael is, I dare say, more than a little incapacitated. Glitter Gulch treated him rather poorly, as it does most its visitors, not that this deters them from returning. Quite the contrary. Abuse and sacrifice generate a need in the sufferer to justify the pain, hence love – for a city, for a country, for a person – it doesn't matter which, the process is the same. Pure cognitive dissonance. Rather sad. Entirely mercenary. But ever so effective.

I know you haven't heard much from me recently, but I'll attempt to amend that oversight now that young Mr. Redmond isn't keeping such close tabs on me. Looking over his notes, I must say that the representation of me that he has crafted strikes me as excessively critical, at times incoherent, and a strain to the basic tenets of credibility in a way that almost suggest delusions on a level that could be deemed pathological. Artistic license, I suppose. Although if that were the case, I'd expect the whole thing to be a bit more... well, artistic. Perhaps he's just a prick. Ockham's razor and all that.

But the boy deserves some sympathy, he honestly does. He's been through a lot in the past few weeks. While far from the monster he seems to think me, I'll admit that I'm not the most pleasant travel companion at times. And, of course, I'm offended at a few of the indignities, abominations, and rancid banalities that he's attributed to me, but more than anything, I'm touched, deeply surprised and I might go so far as to say honored that – in spite of all the cant he's spewed in denouncing me – he still seems to genuinely believe in me. Although, I'm not sure why.

The last few days have been merciless on him. Just ruthless.

You should have seen him crying about her. You should have heard him sobbing into the phone when they were talking. But he didn't tell you anything about that, now did he. Let me check. Nope. Perhaps he thinks the whiteness of those pages can better symbolize the emptiness, the vacuity of his emotional state than words ever could. Can you believe this fucking guy? For a would-be author, he's rather shy. An aspiring exhibitionist has no business with such modesty. He's been talking about her the whole trip, but in this record, he mentions her only a handful of times. Keeping secrets never helps, I'm afraid. Nor does making stuff up. Not that I blame him. He's hoed a hard row. It's tough to make anything of this land, this sprawling, formless, nameless, godless, contrast-heavy, meaning-light, purplely-mountain-magestic land that never seems to come to an end. Ditto for me. I'm a rhetorically uncrackable nut. But enough about me. Nothing is as intolerable as a book entirely about oneself.

It was our first night in Vegas – dark already and not even drunk – and we'd just checked into a fleabag motel just outside of downtown. I suppose my little stunt in the canyon convinced him that our journey together drew near to a close, because while I was in the shower, he finally telephoned back to New York. He made The Call. At least he thought he was making The Call. It was supposed to be The I'm-coming-home-soon-so-baby-we-can-finally-be-together-for-good-this-time-I-mean-it Call. It ended up still being The Call, just not the The Call that Michael had hoped it would be. Instead, those twin bitch-fates of chance and circumstance conspired to make it The Hey-honey-it's-me-what's-the-matter-Leah-aren't-you-glad-to-hear-from-me-hey-who-is-that-in-the-background-what-do-you-mean-it's-Martin-but-it's-almost-midnight-there-why-is-he-at-your-apartment-what-sort-of-just-happened-what-started-last-week-holy-shit-but-he's-

my-oldest-friend-hell-he's-even-sort-of-my-boss-no-I-don't-want-to-talk-to-him-why-the-fuck-would-I-want-to-talk-to-him-of-course-I'm-upset-how-could-I-not-be-how-could-you-do-this-to-me-I-know-I'm-not-perfect-for-the-love-of-God-I-certainly-know-that-but-did-you-really-have-to-start-fucking-Martin-I-mean-he-is-my-best-friend-even-if-he's-not-a-very-good-one-so-yeah-it's-pretty-fucked-up-that-you're-leaving-me-for-him-oh-am-I-the-one-who-left-a-long-time-ago-am-I-the-one-who-was-never-really-there-in-the-first-place-Jesus-Christ-I-don't-need-these-word-games-you-know-how-much-I-hate-these-passive-aggressive-semantic-grudge-match-word-games-etcetera

Call that lasted though more than an hour of screaming and crying and pleading and blaming while I cowered in the motel bathroom trying to allow them the illusion of privacy yet still struggling to hear any juicy bits.

The plotline held few surprises – utterly typical complaints of distance, neglect and infidelity – and of course she knew more than he'd ever admitted, perhaps even suspected more than there was to admit. No innocents played in this particular game. And the delivery, as always, reeked of the melodrama, the absence of perspective, the exaggerated performances of the genuinely emotionally harmed. And I didn't ever get the benefit of clear dialogue – his lines garbled in the throws of regret and indignation, hers nearly muted through the inadequate speaker of a plastic telephone. Yet even the words that reached my ears unobstructed weren't exactly provocative – just tired old phrases spoken as they're spoken by a million heartbroken saps a day, hardly worth hearing, certainly not worth remembering, nor writing down.

The only exception stood out both for the clarity of the exchange and the sentiment's uniqueness – although what jumped out at me as unique may have been its

prototypical commonness. It sounded like Leah had just berated Michael for any number of different failings – emotional, interpersonal, intellectual, artistic – and he countered with one of those questions that we always want to ask, but to which we never want to know the answer:

“Then why did you ever have faith in me?”

The room went silent. Michael shut up. The toilet stopped running. Even the traffic outside seemed to hush. All I could hear at that moment was the static coming through the copper wiring all the way from New York as Leah paused and formulated her answer, the answer, it turns out, that would have been the same if she had asked him and if he had been honest with himself. Two big ifs.

“Because you let me.”

So ended a volume in the life of Michael Redmond, and with little encouragement on my part, he decided to add a small epilogue in the form of a three day bender. He rolled the dice on the heart of a lady and he lost her. He lost it all. Hard to be a knight-errant without a lady-saint waiting. So all pursuit of insight or wisdom, no matter how fleeting, no matter how insignificantly or feebly noble, flew straight out the window of the Mancha Rosinante along with the top from a handle of Jack as we headed into the heart of the neon beast of flashing lights and ringing bells and splashing booze and stripper skin, only to emerge the following Sunday at six AM as a sobering vomit in a diner’s bathroom rolled the giant stone from before the eyes of my perception and I came back to our red vinyl booth to see the empty tomb of Michael’s still-drunken soul trying to pick a fight with a junkie-pimp sitting at the next table. The longer it lasted, the deeper

he sank, the more dangerous his behavior was bound to become, the harder it would be for me to extricate myself – much less him – from whatever unpleasanties he'd manage to stir up. Yet I knew that binge would last so long as we remained in Las Vegas, so in my first moment of complete coherence in more than forty-eight hours, I dragged him out of the restaurant, into the car, and drove.

And here we are, still driving. I know not where. Even why is hazy. Yet we drive. That is to say I drive. Redmond sleeps – occasionally waking to bitch and/or moan, to mumble violent gibberish, to threaten regurgitation if I don't stop the car, and to periodically make good on those threats leaning out the open window. He stayed unconscious through our last stop at a filling station, where I skimmed over his notebook, bought a new map, and tried to orient myself. My success was only marginal.

Now the heat of mid afternoon is upon us and we drive down a single lane desert highway that seems to slope endlessly downward into the distance. The range that we pass though consist of little but sand, a shimmering sand, where the heat rises from it in waves of rippling mirages in the distance. Mirages of what? Of more sand, of course. The whole scenario screams of post-apocalyptic wasteland motifs, but I'd just as soon not dwell on that as my hangover begins to fully blossom. I desperately need more coffee, but I haven't seen a human dwelling in almost fifty miles.

"I need to piss." Sounds like Michael is awake. "If you don't stop the car, I'm not even gonna aim for the window."

I stop the car.

While he stumbles a good fourteen feet out into the desert and does what he must, I spread the new map on the dashboard and try to make sense of the squiggly lines and

numbers whose meanings have eluded me thus far. Through the open car door I can see that Michael has finished his business, walked half way back, and taken a seat in the sand. He can see what I'm doing as well, and he seems to have an ill-advised faith in my map-reading abilities.

"Where are we?" he yells.

"I'm not sure. I think, perhaps, we're in Death Valley."

This elicits his laughter – his cold, hard, cruel, drunken, isn't-this-appropriate, so-funny-I-need-to-lie-down-on-my-back laughter. "Perfect. Wonderful. Exactly how I feel. There's no getting out of here. I'm in the lowest fucking place that you can get in this country. The hottest fucking place in it too. The closest approximation that this nation can offer to a physical representation of hell, and I couldn't be any fucking happier. Look at this." He holds up two handfuls of sand. "It's not just sand. It's salt. Goddamn salt! At least half of these damn little grains are that clear colorless crystal of sodium and chlorine, that hueless bitch that catches every pigment in the rainbow if you just look at the right angle, that necessary component of all warm-blooded life that keeps anything at all from growing!" He throws the sand and salt into the air and lets the minerals rain down onto his head. "Even if there were water, even if there was less heat, this place would still be uninhabitable – worthless – devoid of all potential – unable to sustain any form of vegetation in this ground that calls my name. Death Valley is perfect. This is where I need to be. Not just a desert. A desert is easy. But a desert that's a valley that's the bottom of a million year old dead ocean that's the hottest place on the friggin' hemisphere? This is it. Jesus Christ was a pussy. Forty days out here don't mean shit. Might as well be forty minutes. Forty seconds. What the fuck are you

searching for, anyway, when you're the son of Mr. Omnipotent – the nepotistic holder of a direct line to the very meaning giver himself? I'm the one that needs to find something. So I'll top that effort. I'll stay forty weeks. Forty years. Forty centuries and eons, and I bet I still won't get a damn thing. Why, I'll be here fasting, until I die, reaffirming the name, and in Death Valley, my brittle bones drenched in the hate of the sun will be here when the very thing explodes and..."

He just goes on like this. He rants and raves and continues in such a manner that I eventually stop watching and go back to trying to figure out the map. Then I notice something and I am forced to interrupt him.

"Wait a minute, Michael. I was wrong. Death Valley doesn't start for at least another twenty-eight miles."

He pauses, his mouth still slightly open.

"Shit," he mutters. He stands up, brushes the sand off his knees, and starts walking back to the car. "Well, hurry up and let's get there before I forget what I was going to say."

We start driving again, but I don't stop the car until well past nightfall.

L.A.

Things are not going well for your humble narrator.

Milac has proven himself a bit more unpredictable than most sixty-seven year old men. Hell, he'd be a whack job at age seventeen, but when he sits over there in the passenger seat, all gray hair and weathered skin, staring at a billboard or a piece of architecture or a fucking rock formation and a wave of ecstasy passes over him and suddenly his cup is just brimming with tiddles, it totally freaks me right the fuck out.¹⁶⁸ It's like he's a cokehead, but he doesn't need the actual coke to just fly off into space – instead of powder regulation, it just happens at random. It unnerves me.

And I need all the nerves I can get. I need something. Vegas was a total bust for me. Everything started with a bad call. It turns out that Leah Kim D'nomder, my saintly, long-suffering girlfriend, is neither as saintly nor as long-suffering as I had believed. It also turn out that she's not so much my girlfriend anymore. I won't bore you with the details, but the particulars involve my old buddy, Martin Readerly, and thus leave me in some doubt as to my current and future employment status. Still, the limited access corporate credit card that Milton provided seems to still be functioning so I guess I'm still on the job, but with Milac's newfound sense of authorial aimlessness, I'm not at all sure what the job that I'm on is supposed to entail.

And to top it all off, then I got a wicked case of food poisoning from that goddamn middle of the night casino kitchen food. It knocked me completely out of

¹⁶⁸ How can a man both quote Nabokov and utter near-imbecile banalities within a single sentence? These are the character inconsistencies that vex me, Michael. Just when I think you show promise, you fail.

commission for half a week. I can barely even remember what happened during that time. Nothing interesting, I hope.

So I'm a little lost at this point. Milac's chances of producing a bestseller drop in my estimation every day, and my hopes of interesting anyone in a story about him seem irreparably toilet bound. Yet I'm so far into this shindig, so far from home, or what I once thought was home, I don't know what else I can do other than stay the course, follow through, try to get this amorphous job completed. I'll help Milac find his American story and if he doesn't write about it, fuck, maybe I will. Or maybe when we find it, I'll just want to live it, too. I've got no reason to head back to the Big Apple now. I've got nothing there. I've got nothing anywhere.

But now we're in California. The land of plenty, where the beer flows like wine, where everything exists – if only in the residents' drug-addled imaginations – and anything at all is possible. And this road leads to Los Angeles, the City of Angels, Lala Land, the Entertainment Capital of the World, the Desert Flower, the City of Suburbs, where dreams go to die.

Crap.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ Indeed.

H.L.W.D.

INT. DINER – DAY

MILAC, 67, sits in a booth, eating the remains of two different breakfast platters. Milac looks well-worn, and worse for the wear. His face suggests wisdom well marbled with bullshit (or perhaps the other way around), like a college professor or a carnival fortune teller.

MIKE, 29, walks over and sits down, wiping his hands on his pants. Mike is exactly what he looks like, a schmuck.

MIKE

Toilet's busted. Damn thing nearly overflowed onto my shoes. Hey, did you eat my fries?

MILAC

Yes.

MIKE

Dick.

MILAC

No, just your fries.

EXT. PARKING LOT – DAY

Milac and Mike walk to their car, a '77 Mancha Rosinante, also worse for the wear.

MIKE

So what do you think of my script idea?

MILAC

I think it sucks. So it should sell well. A bit arbitrary though, no?

INT. CAR – DAY

Mike starts the car with just a couple tries at the ignition while Milac sparks up a joint with much less trouble.

MIKE

You just don't understand the medium, Milac. The arbitrary nature of film is a key component of its charm. It's not confined to the ridged logic of philosophy, subject to the tonal demands of poetry, or plagued by the linguistic possibilities of something so unencumbered as, say, a novel.

MILAC

But it just doesn't make sense.

MIKE

It doesn't have to.

They pull out of the parking lot and onto the late afternoon streets of Hollywood.

MILAC

But it jumps around from scene to scene, never letting the audience, or even the reader, get a grasp of what's really going on, what they're doing or who the characters are supposed to be.

MIKE

That's the whole beauty of it, don't you see?

MILAC

Well, no, I don't.

Milac passes the joint to Mike, who puff-puffs and passes it back.

MIKE

By creating enough contradiction, by using one frame to refute the next, by presenting the morass of human existence in a chaos similar to that of human perception, you can create an experience that registers as far truer to the human mind than any linear narrative.

MILAC

That's an interesting theory, Michael, but it's also complete bullshit.

MIKE

What theory isn't?

MILAC

Exactly.

MIKE

But the fact remains, the person who sees these seemingly disjointed scenes and images strung together will almost necessarily create in their own mind a substance that attaches them, will fuse the connections that we've left dismantled and bring forth a meaning that holds far more power than anything the writer could have conceived because it's personal to the subjective perceiver and incorporates not just the artistically rendered material but all experientially remembered material that the viewer has at their disposal and must utilize in order to fashion themselves a meaning. Not only is it personal, it's entirely unique.

Milac cocks an eyebrow and slowly exhales a plume of gray.

MILAC

Sounds like an artist trying to abdicate the responsibility of creation to the audience.

MIKE

Not full on abdication, just an acknowledgment of the shared task.

MILAC

So what does all this mean to the script?

INT. SPACESHUTTLE COLUMBIA – REENTRY

Mike and Milac, in full NASA regalia, sit at the helm of a doomed spacecraft as the windows glow red from the incredible heat of the friction of the atmosphere against the soon-to-fail ceramic deflection tiles.

The joint still hangs from Milac's lips.

MIKE

For starters, the congruity of things such as plot lines and settings become almost a moot point.

MILAC

Why is that?

The shuttle begins to shake violently.

MIKE
(yelling)

Because the value of the work comes from the interior mental processes, not the structural integrity of the exterior conventional reality. In fact, the function that imbues the new meanings into experience is aided by the break-up of the previously assumed. It's easiest to assemble a fresh understanding when the old "knowledge" explodes completely and scatters its remains over half a continent.

A tremendous crash comes from behind them and the cabin fills instantly with flame.

MILAC
We are definitely going to be sent to hell for this.

INT. HELL – NIGHT

Underground rivers of fire and boiling blood surround the small island of misery upon which Milac and Mike have landed, still wearing their flight suits, in a massive cave of an inferno.

Tiny cartoon DEVILS with pitchforks and scimitars flay our heroes open and brand them repeatedly, occasionally going so far as to slice off a limb, deep fry it in one of the rivers and then reattach it, nerves and all, so that the mortals can feel the full effect of the excruciating pain.

MIKE
Hey, Milac, is there any love left in that jay?

Milac passes over the cigarette, which Mike relights in the lake of fire, and takes heavily.

MIKE
Thanks.

MILAC
And how is this specific to the movies?

MIKE
It's not limited to them, but they hold the best hope for achieving the aim. Movies make the fewest requests on the viewers' imaginations – you don't think about what it looks like or how it sounds, that's given – so more cognitive room is left for the immediate creation of meaning, but this will only happen if the gaps are left to stimulate a need for such creation.

MILAC

And if these gaps aren't left open?

MIKE

Bad things can happen.

A devil slams his blade down into Mike's skull, cleaving his face nearly in half.

MILAC

What sorts of bad things?

MIKE

Like the mental acceptance of a given ontology without examination of its evidence, rationale, or ramifications.

EXT. OLD WESTERN TOWN CLICHÉ – NIGHT

In tattered and half-burnt flight suits, Mike and Milac stand in the middle of saloon-lined dirt road. Music, laughter, and occasional gunfire pour out from the establishments on either side of them.

Ten-gallon hats sit upon their heads; loaded six-shooters hang from their waists.

Milac looks around slowly.

MILAC

Can I have my joint back?

Mike passes it over.

MILAC

Thanks.

(pause)

But do you really think a theological space-Western is the best vehicle for pioneering such techniques?

MIKE

I don't see how it could work as anything other than a theological space-Western.

From the other end of the street, five men approach. They are easily recognizable as JESUS, MUHAMMAD, MOSES, BUDDHA and DARTH VADAR. All of them sport Stetsons and pistols; Buddha also carries a Winchester.

Mike goes for his gun and all hell breaks loose as everyone draws and the gunfight rages.

MIKE

(yelling between shots)

Good and evil, cosmic allegory, the myth of the rugged individual - how could these not show up in a work about the interplay of identity, belief, and reality?

MILAC

Show up, yes, that much I understand, but why give them center stage?

The Holy Pentavirate finally succeeds in gunning down both Milac and Mike, and as they fall to their knees, blood pouring out of multiple wounds, Mike gasps his last words.

MIKE

Because subtlety just doesn't work too well in Hollywood.

INT. CAR – DAY

Back on the streets of Hollywood, back exactly as they were, Mike and Milac drive in their Rosinante, although they now wear cowboy hats.

MIKE

You see, the image is actually the ultimate reality here. The superficial is the site of all depth. What you see is all there is. Far beyond fake, there is a complete lack of the genuine that can even be imitated. You sit today in an entire world of surfaces.

Milac tries to draw on the cashed roach, but when it fails to spark, he stubs it in the ashtray.

MILAC

Get me the fuck out of this town.

EXT. CAR – DUSK

The Rosinante drives off quickly into the sunset.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ For once, Michael, you've portrayed events exactly as they occurred.

S.D.

The sunny shores of San Diego – with their tanning crowds, their beach volleyball, their crashing warm-water surf, and their sand-so-fun-no-one-cares-it’s-not-white – form the picture, the essence, the very Platonic ideal that Midwesterners – as they shovel themselves out from beneath three feet of midwinter snow – equate in their minds with that mythical wonderland called California.

Truth be told, it is all that... and more.

San Diego, Haven to Surfers.

San Diego, King of all Zoos.

San Diego, Tamer of Whales.

San Diego, Favored Son of the U.S. Navy.

San Diego, Gateway to Mexico.

San Diego, Home of Postmodern Malls.

San Diego, Thumbtack that Holds in the Lower-left-hand Corner of the Country.

I don’t know why I love you, but I do.

Milac likes the beach. He really likes the beach. For the last forty-nine minutes, he’s been sitting here, not saying anything, just leaning against the seawall, watching the waves turn into sand, smelling the rays turn into pigment, and listening to the sounds of the masses strolling and playing on the concrete boardwalk behind him and in the dirty brown sand before him. I watch, smell, and listen, too. The suntan oil hangs so heavily

in the air that I can taste it along with the salt. All clouds have been banished from the solid blue sheet of sky overhead, but even the high noon summer sun can't bully the ocean and the constant breeze into raising the temperature much above seventy-five. When I think about it, I recognize the presence of near-perfect beer-drinking weather, but I don't dare point this out to Milac. Not now. It's early yet.

We've been exploring the Mission Bay area all morning, and the only thing it seems to lack is something to dislike. Bike paths, marinas, parks, beaches, cheap restaurants, bars on the water, and residential neighborhoods both pretty and non-ostentatious – this part of the city has much to endear. The past few weeks of playing tour guide have left me with a habitual desire to keep moving, to show Milac the rest of the city, and then move on, but I fight this urge. I remind myself repeatedly that I'm in no rush. I'm not really headed anywhere.¹⁷¹

"Perfect," Milac says, surveying the lay of the body-strewn sand.

Milac licks his lips as he speaks, savoring the sensation of the American variety of this delicacy.

The downtown of San Diego at night is a civic planner's wet dream. Thanks to Balboa Park hemming it in to the northwest, the freeway gets hidden nicely from view, and the city, though large, feels small, almost intimate, at its center. The refurbished faux-antiquity of the Gaslamp Quarter – complete with combustion-based lighting and brick sidewalks – teems with brewpubs, bistros, and fashion boutiques that all center around the kaleidoscopic tiers of the Horton Plaza complex of stores and theaters and

¹⁷¹ This is the problem that nearly costs us everything.

galleries and the all important upscale hotels. And the massive bay of blue-turned-black-beneath-the-stars that curls west and stretches south is large enough to make the aircraft carriers parked at the naval base on the other side seem charming and far, far away. Even the waterfront itself says urban in only the most urbane ways, with renovated piers, convention centers, novelty shops, and more than adequate lighting. And everywhere the eye can see there are people milling about, drinking, eating, paying, consuming, enjoying, thriving, and driving the prosperity that such a place caters to, feeds off of, and desperately needs to continue to exist.

We do our part.

Since the sunset, we've stashed the car in a downtown garage, been in and out of three different restaurants, and lost count of how many bars we've seen in our spendthrift adventure up one avenue and down the next, through the heart of a sea of well dressed sailors and bankers and business believers, bubbling with drink and dance and the exuberance of affluence, all polished to shining in the ecumenical eyes of simple human enjoyment.

To describe our state as drunk would do an injustice to the euphoria and dislocation with which this particular evening envelopes us, holding us close to its breast, nurturing our sense of whimsy, keeping our testicles warm. Milac is on a spree the likes of which I've never witnessed. He can't be stopped. He can't be stifled. He won't shut up, but that's no surprise, and tonight it appears that nobody seems to mind. Everyone here is garrulous, everyone wants to share, and everyone – for god knows whatever reason – expresses a willingness to listen. As usual, I stand by in awe and wonder at Milac's loquacious ability to befriend individuals, couples, groups, hordes and entire bars

filled with people instantly and at no visible cost or effort. And this era of good feelings lasts well on into the night, granting us access to the thoughts, emotions, and recreational drug supplies of watering hole patrons of all variety.¹⁷²

Our cup runneth over and over and over again. By the time the bars begin to close, I can't read my watch, not that I'm trying, but I swim through the crowds surrounding Milac with the ease of a man on a jelly-soaked dance floor. Somehow we're invited or follow along to parties in places farther south by the bay, and we swing through apartments, hotel rooms, and condos, though back rooms, through alleys, through courtyards and wharfs, through everything velvet and loading dock driveways, through fenced off parking lots and a florescent warehouse.

I emerge momentarily from my glowing haze of chemical friendliness when we step from a wooden pier onto a forty-some-odd foot yacht and a fear grabs me by my tailbone, throws me down to the deck, and heightens to a state of paranoia my awareness of the transition between land and water. Suddenly, my legs fail, my feet slide and I can't regain my stance as I realize I have no idea where I am, where the car is, or how I can get back to it. Without it, I've lost my base, my volition, my capacity for direction and self-determination. I feel the liquid beneath the hull of the ship shift and the pilings begin to glide slowly past and my delirium jumps to panic as it dawns on me that I'm pulling apart from the earth, the landmass, the nation for the first time. A real separation grows by the second as we pull deeper into the bay and head for the boundless ocean, a divide that I can't bridge with simple pedestrian gumption and will. And my apprehension comes from more than my inability to swim – it also derives from a superstitious faith that I

¹⁷² You take an awfully large number of words to say we were on a coke binge.

can't long survive without the soothing touch of my native soil, no matter what form that soil may take, so long as it be of my home.

So I sit on the deck, grasping onto a railing, as I quiver and watch the lights of the city recede in the distance. A gelatinous blob about to fully break down, I'm on the verge of just letting myself slip into the water when Milac taps me on the shoulder and hands me a cold bottle.

"You look like you could use a beer," he says with a smile.

And this makes everything fine again.

I'm no longer alone in the bottomless depths.

Milac steers me back into the party, the people, the fun, and I remember what's happening, who brought us to the boat, how many hours this little cruise should last, and that I will, just after dawn in fact, return to point of origin if all goes close to plan.

Only a couple dozen people are still drinking, smoking, snorting, popping, on board at this point, but none of us want to end the night just because all the land-based options are exhausted, and the captain, the owner, the director of this venture needs our noise, our frivolity, our cover as an excuse to put out into the waters and sail just a few miles south where he can meet another vessel and take into his hull what amounts to a small mountain of cocaine. Good plan, no? This doesn't make me nervous at all. I'm at just the right point of oblivion that a sense of psychic detachment from my automobile can paralyze me with terror, but the prospect of acting as an accomplice to a crime that could send me to prison for half a century doesn't even faze me.¹⁷³ The booze and the talk and the laughter is light even if the ocean and the night is dark and the music relaxes

¹⁷³ The only thing less interesting than hearing the details of another man's drug trip is hearing the details of another man's drug deal.

even as it keeps awake and the zoom zoom zoom just presses forward in the head until nothing exists in future consciousness but the ability to see back as to what already has happened to a self that you can't detect any personal control over anyway.

Then the floodlights flash on and pour into the cabin, and as we stop the stereo and stare out at the larger ship beside us, we can only see the silhouettes of the men with machineguns standing on the deck above. I watch with novel amusement as my former self thinks something along the lines of 'oh, shit, we're all dead,' but then our captain gives the men the news that they want and then sound erupts from the armed boat's speakers – a Spanish-language cover of the Village People's "In The Navy" – and all but a few of the guards start dancing.

Well, it turns out that our new found friend is buying direct from the Mexican Navy, and these sailors like to party. So before we're allowed to go on our way back to San Diego, everybody climbs over onto their cutter, does a few lines, shoots some tequila, and sings in whatever language happens to come out after that.

Sorry if my description is a little low on the details here. I'm pulling this out of a mist myself. What happens next is a very good question because before we manage to get back on the yacht, my memory completely blacks out.

From the heat, I'd guess it's early afternoon when I wake up. I've got no fucking clue where I am. All my clothes are still on, so that's a good sign. The gears spin quickly through my head but the teeth don't latch into any bicycle chains of recall.¹⁷⁴ I'm

¹⁷⁴ And what would it power to spin these chains? The dharma wheel? The bicycle Hel?

in a filthy room I don't recognize, so of course, my head jumps to the worse case scenarios.

Have I been shanghaied?

Do militaries impress people into service these days?

Am I currently under the command of the Navy of the Republic of Mexico?

Then I hear a mariachi band covering a disco tune¹⁷⁵ in the background somewhere, and I know that it's even worse than I imagined.

I'm in ...

¹⁷⁵ There's only one place that could be. Let's not drag this out for them...

T.M.

... Tijuana.

How the fuck did I end up here?

I sit up gingerly to take in my surroundings and my inner ear and my belly spin wildly in opposite directions. The air in the room smells heavily of sweat and other bodily secretions that have soaked into the bare mattress. Light filters in through a towel that's been tacked up over the sole window, and I can barely distinguish a human form curled up in the corner. As my eyes adjust to the dim, I see that this lump is Milac, disheveled but breathing. I search through my pockets and find them disturbingly empty. No keys. No cash. No credit card. No driver's license. No proof of identity or status as an American citizen. I clutch at my chest and am relieved to find my spare key to the Rosinante still hanging from the chain around my neck. Still, my hopes of an easy return trip to her fade rapidly as I notice that Milac's pockets have been literally turned inside out. I've got to hand it to whoever dumped us here – they were thorough. I'm just thankful that none of my fillings are missing and that both my kidneys remain in my lower back.

A crippling nausea sweeps over my body and I collapse back onto the mattress, into a putrid unconsciousness.

Someone seems to be shaking my shoulder. I've no idea how many hours have passed, but the pain in my gut and the fog on my brain have both shrunk to semi-tolerable levels, so I open my eyes and see Milac standing over me with a worried look on his wrinkled face.

"What happened?" he asks. Okay, we're in trouble.

"I was hoping you'd know."

"The last thing I remember is landing at a fishing village just north of Rosarito."

"Then you've got an extra couple hours on me." I rub my head and sit up. "Why the hell didn't we go back to San Diego?"

"We were having so much fun with the men on the gunship, we didn't even notice when the yacht left."

"Son of a bitch."

"They couldn't take us back themselves, so they sent us ashore at the nearest port, and whoever we met there or how we got here, I just can't seem to recall."

We step out of the darkness of the fleabag hotel and into the light and the heat and the noise and the stench of late afternoon on the *Avenida Revolución*. In every direction, everywhere the eye can see, everything is for sale. Booze and women and zebra-stripped burros. Trinkets and blankets and prescription pharmaceuticals. Tennis shoes and Mexican food and a compromised cultural heritage. Dental work and auto repair and cosmetic surgery to mask the hideous twisting of souls.¹⁷⁶ All things available at bargain

¹⁷⁶ Near the end of his life, F. Scott Fitzgerald told his daughter that he could have written some fine stories if he had just been able to resist sermonizing. You'll probably never write any fine stories, but you should still follow this advice.

basement prices. All things unencumbered by the regulations and mores of a strong central state. All penchants and fetishes await satisfaction if only one has a few bills in hand and a very strong stomach.

The sun will probably be going down soon, so the tamer crowds – the piñata hunting grandmothers, the housewives filling errands on the cheap, the schoolchildren on fieldtrips to see what poor people look like – are all heading home, across the border and back to their safety, while the stream of carnally minded American men of all ages just begins to head over into the danger and anonymity of the sweltering Mexican night.

Tijuana, Haven to Gringos.

Tijuana, King of all Border Towns.

Tijuana, Home of the Donkey Show.

Tijuana, Gateway to Sleaze.

Tijuana, Sells Misery for Pleasure.

Tijuana, Favored Destination of the Californian Teenage Son.

Tijuana – simply put, spoken slowly through teeth – The Happiest Place on Earth.

I've never felt comfortable in a place like this. The few times I've crossed this border, I've gotten drunk and I've gotten high and then I've gotten the fuck back to the stateside. There's a lot to go wrong. Certain problems wait to happen. And as much as the moneyed *Norte Americanos* prey on the desperate misfortune of the locals and seek out the downtrodden to fulfill their urges, the unholy enthusiasm that they put forth in their efforts to purchase their wants simply pales in comparison to the relentless passion

with which the sellers peddle their wares. For those who must vend a product – be it flesh or intoxicant or spiritual awakening or literary masterpiece – do so with the determination of the bitter knowledge that should they fail, they starve. As such, their hunt is ruthless, it is a force sell, it grabs and chases and stalks down its consumer and gorges the customer on whatever good or service it takes to bleed the precious last drops of green and silver from out their silk-lined pockets. These wondrous human sellers are the best¹⁷⁷ that exist in the trade, for in these sales and sacrifices they eek out their very life. And each time that I've subjected myself to their wiles, I've pulled myself out before I could lose too much in cheap gain, yet the constant bombardment, the badgering, the brutal unending pitch took a mental toll that I grew to hate, to avoid, to loathe, but never quite to resent. For as much as I disliked the behavior, I couldn't help but understand it.

Today is different. Today we are different. No hustler bothers us. No shill attempts to drag us into his club. No salesman even musters the effort to offer us junk as we walk by his stall. Today we must smell of our utter lack of money. Not the hungriest predator would stoop to dine on two swine so noxiously sickened. Perhaps Milac looks too old and too un-American to be interested, or perhaps our disheveled, hopeless look shows to all that we've already been fleeced clean.

Either way, the effect helps me breathe. It feels wonderful to be wholly ignored. I'm not so foolish to assume we blend in, but to walk these streets amid the clatter of

¹⁷⁷ These are not the best sellers, although their skill is mighty. The best sellers are those who can sell that which isn't there. Those who manage to sell what everyone needs but what doesn't exist. The ultimate, grand-high, heavyweight world champion best seller is the bullshit artist. When all you offer is bullshit, you must be the best seller.

pressures economic, hormonal, and psychogenic, and not be targeted in either direction is a luxury I fully appreciate.

We walk north towards the pedestrian bridge with the wretched lime-green railings that leads across the freeway to the busiest transnational checkpoint in the world. It's an easy enough path to navigate (although the signs are almost invisible) by just following the Americans that already have their purchases in hand as they head towards their home. We've just crested the top of this bridge – we can see the quiet countryside of the homeland in the distance, contrasting starkly with the ramshackle slums stacked up behind us – when it hits me that we're completely fucked.

There's no way we're getting back into the United States of America.

Even if the officers at the border believe me that I'm a citizen, even if their computers can somehow prove it and let me pass, it'd be easier to convince them that Milac is their own personal risen Savior¹⁷⁸ than to sell them on him having a domestic origin. Suddenly my glassy-eyed vision cracks open and I can see America from the perspective of those who want it, but can't have it. The hopelessness creeps quickly up the muscles of my back and squeezes my lungs into shortness of breath. I don't even have to say anything. We just stand there until this same realization dawns on Milac as well. He understands. He feels it. He hadn't really grasped what that arrogant country held until it slipped from between his fingers. Neither had I. Milac steadies himself against the metal handrail and commences weeping openly.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Don't discount the possibility too quickly.

¹⁷⁹ You have no idea about why or for whom my tears fell. Don't comment as if you do.

I begin to feel just the tiniest twinge of what it must feel like to be one of the million sellers trapped in Tijuana, and I hope that my present nausea lasts long enough to keep hunger at bay until we figure something else out. I don't want to feel any more of this sensation.

It takes us half an hour just to find a phone that will let us place a collect call to the States. It seems to me that I'm fresh out of friends north of this border, and even had I kept them, they wouldn't be much help. Luckily, Milac still has one friend – we hope – one rich and powerful and well-connected friend.

During his short time in Manhattan, Milac memorized the seven digits that reach Milton Rederijkerskamer's penthouse suite, and I laugh at the idea of his area code being anything other than 212. After haggling briefly with an international operator, Milac holds on the line, waiting for Milton to pick up, preparing himself to sweet talk, to cajole, to promise and lie and manipulate himself back into the benevolent graces of the big man whose slightest whim could make a heaven of hell.¹⁸⁰ Instead, when the call finally does connect, Milac stays on for about thirty seconds before handing the receiver to me.

"Hello?" I say, somewhat startled and rather scared. But the voice that comes through on the other end isn't the booming vibrato of the melodramatic executive. Rather, I hear the weasel-like nasal pitch of his underling, my former friend, the man who pawned this entire trip on to me and did other fairly unmentionable things.

"Mike Redmond, how the heck are you?" Martin squeals with the excitement of an eighth-grade girl.

¹⁸⁰ Because his name is Milton, you've incorporated a line from Paradise Lost. There you go being clever again. Listen to me laugh.

“Not so good, Martin.” My teeth start to grind involuntarily.

“Oh, yeah. I guess I know why. Sorry about that, but hey, you really can’t blame me, and you know it would have happened sooner or later.”

“Forget it, Martin. I’ve got bigger problems now. Milac and I are stranded in Tijuana. We’ve got no money, no credit cards, no identification, and no way to get myself or the literary genius that I’m escorting back into the U.S., so please put your boss on the phone so he can figure out a way to get us out of here.”

“No can do, Mikey. Sorry. The big guy is out of town, out of the country, I think. That’s why we’re in his apartment, house-sitting.”

“*We’re* in his apartment?” I can hear the delicate movement of Leah’s feet in the background.

“I. I mean, I’m in his apartment.”

“Whatever. Okay. The important thing here is that you find a way to get Milac and me back into the country and get us a new one of those shiny little corporate credit cards. No matter how you may feel towards me, you still understand that Milac remains a valuable commodity, and your boss will be pissed if you lose him in Mexico, right?”

“Honestly, Mike, I think Milton may be trying to distance himself from the whole Milac fiasco.¹⁸¹ Like I said, he’s gone off to far-flung lands again. There’s really not much I can do without his say-so, and he’s been incommunicado for the last week.” He pauses as though this completes his thought. Then he adds, “My hands are tied.”

“Goddamn it, Martin. You can tell me I’m worthless. You can send me out into the wilds with a crazy poet from central Asia. You can even get me out of the picture so

¹⁸¹ Fiasco? Did he really call me a fiasco? I’ve been called a number of things, but never a fiasco to the best of my knowledge. It has a certain ring to it.

that you can fuck my girlfriend in your boss's apartment, but you can't leave me stranded, penniless and destitute, to die of scurvy in Ti-fucking-juana. You may be a shit. But you're not that much of a shit."

"You certainly do have a way with words."

"Martin..."

"Fine. Shit. Let me see... go to the American consulate.¹⁸² Milton has a connection there listed in his rolodex. He should be able to help you both out..."

¹⁸² Everything in Tijuana is eminently corrupt. There's no need for pretense or fantasy or show. No need for fabrications, for metaphysics, for rationales. Just money. And where money reigned I was hopeless, or could feign it with ease, without the help of one Milton and his ever-present network of stooges.

Good lord. What did I just write? I must be drunk or dying to be talking like this...

VI

“Know thy enemy.”

– Sun Tzu, The Art of War

“Know thy self.”

– Socrates, Charmides

“Do I hear an echo?”

– Milac Rasselas, The Death of Wisdom

We drive north. We drive north as quickly as possible. We drive north as quickly as possible and don't stop, don't slow down, don't even look back until better than one hundred and fifty miles stand between us and the place that we thought had caught us. We stay on the coast, stay in wide open places, stay quick in our freedom and lost in our speed. We stay on the highway and out of the water with its cunning deception of clinging salt-heavy ease.

For all the bad things I have to say about Martin – and the list could well fill up a volume – he came through with more delicious corporate credit when we needed it, and the connection to which he sent us was a paragon of efficiency. Once the new magnetic stripped card arrived the next morning and the cash fee had been advanced, it took this nameless (as so many of Milton's friends remain) contact less than twenty-one hours to procure the necessities for our peaceful reintroduction to the States. He swore that the credentials he delivered to us were flawless – genuine drivers' licenses from Utah and Nebraska respectively, taken from recently compromised individuals (Milac's from a trucker who had died of a heart attack the previous night in one of Tijuana's many whorehouses; mine from a missionary currently rotting in a Mexican jail for pissing-off the wrong man in uniform last week), the photos reworked in expert labs and reformed into documents more convincing than the originals. Milac believed him.¹⁸³ I know he did. He had to. I wanted to have faith in these tiny cards too, but I'd

¹⁸³ You pompous ass. I've just a bit more experience than you in document forging.

read/heard/imagined how many thousands of people try to cross this line illegally every day, and I knew too well how often they failed. Of course, I thought we'd be the exception. We had to be. But the only thing that gave me faith in our chances was the large roll of green that we'd paid for them.

Not everyone can finance this sort of assistance, I reasoned. And logically or not, the more you pay for anything, the more you're forced to believe in it.¹⁸⁴ Still, mine was a nervous devotion.

Early this morning, while we waited in line at the pedestrian border crossing, the queue stretching back some thousand concrete-divider-edged feet, I gnawed a small hole through the inside of my lip and Milac assumed the dumb, defeated posture of a steer being herded to slaughter. All around us, the sticky unwashed mass of humanity held us in its grasp, the antemeridian rush of hung-over, satisfied, slightly poorer, possibly infected Gringos returning to their homes and the sleepy, silent, work-visa-holding Mexicanos waiting to start their day of toil in the gardens, factories, and corporate offices of San Diego. And in this patient swirl of pink and brown faces, a certain imperceptible number knew they were committing a crime. Amidst the mass of quotidian travelers, a certain percentage smuggled that most precious of contrabands – themselves. How many fellow line-members also stood with false or altered or stolen documents in their clammy, twitching hands, willing to brave American censure, even Mexican jail (and all that it entails), for the chance of escaping the city behind them, I had no way of knowing. But I felt them, I smelt them, their odor mingling with mine in the pheromone scent that

¹⁸⁴ So you too know the concept of cognitive dissonance, yet only very selectively do you apply it to yourself. Typical.

screams only of panic, even if I couldn't see them, their faces indistinguishable from the pained and the hopeful, the bored and the weary, the dull and the ambitious. From this, I took hope that perhaps the border guards' perception was no greater than my own.

And the shorter the distance between the start of the line and me, the shorter the interval grew between the thumps of my heart. By the time we actually reached the checkpoint, stepped over the painted line and handed our IDs to the man behind the desk, I dripped perspiration off every edge, I struggled to control what I was sure were visible ticks, and Milac had lost so much color from sallow fright that he looked more Caucasian than I did.

But the man in uniform, the men with the guns, and all the attendant apparatus for our destruction, they simply waved us on – first Milac, then me – and we slowly walked past them, carefully placing each step, lest our legs should falter, until we stood outside the tiny building, the soles of our shoes touching American asphalt, our lungs taking in fresh American air, our eyes gazing up on a wholly different and spectacular American sky. Milac panted several sighs of relief, but for me, the success seemed too easy, and my paranoia had not yet begun to fight.¹⁸⁵

The half hour after that we spent waiting for the bus back to San Diego, back to the car, back to real freedom – that was easily the most excruciating experience of my life. I convinced myself that at any moment the immigration agents would swarm out of building, surround the bus stop, guns drawn, and if not arrest me or drag me back to the southern side, at the very least, open fire. They had clearly just let us get this far to taunt us, to toy, to pretend that we were free at last in order to make it all the more painful

¹⁸⁵ A fittingly jingoistic final cliché to finish off a paragraph of prejudice revealed.

when they crushed us entirely. Perhaps I'm just a natural pessimist or too firm a believer in irony,¹⁸⁶ but such conspiracies at the time seemed much more convincing than the naïve prospect of unfettered achievement of the intended objective.

Once on the bus, I was certain that it would turn around and shoot us back into Tijuana or usher us straight into a federal detainee camp at an undisclosed location. At this point, Milac had heard just about enough out of me on this subject and wanted to relax and enjoy the prospects we once again had at our disposal. Much more the realist, he knew that we'd made it, so he began mocking my every delusion. I only began to breathe a little easier when I slid my key in Rosinante's ignition, turned it, and felt her grumble to life, vibrating rapidly with kinetic energy and potential power. When we paid the garage fee, and passed through the gate and onto the open city street, a slight smile crept onto my face.

Seeing this, Milac simply said, "What about roadblocks?"

My smile dropped and the car jumped a gear. We raced through the traffic to the expressway. We took interstate five to Oceanside and highway one through Los Angeles, through Santa Monica, along Palisades Park, through Malibu, past million-dollar views

¹⁸⁶ Once upon a time there was a priest who believed in god so firmly that he insisted that in all things god would provide. One day he was told that a hurricane was coming that would flood his island and that everyone should evacuate, but he knew that god would provide. So when the jeep came to get him to take him away, he said, don't worry, god will provide. And when the water had risen up to the top of the church and he sat on the roof and a motorboat came to rescue him, he waved them off, saying god will provide. And when the water had reached to the top of the steeple and he held himself up on the top of the cross and a helicopter came to save him, he still refused, yelling god will provide. And when the water rose up over him and he drowned and he met god in heaven and he asked him why he didn't provide, god told him, hey, pal, I provided a jeep, a motorboat, and a helicopter – what more could you ask for?

Yes, this is a stupid story. But the moral works for irony as well. Those who believe most firmly in it often have the most difficulty recognizing it.

from the Pacific Coast Highway, all the way to Ventura and the merge with one-oh-one. Continuing north, pulling farther west, my heart still at a gallop after all these hours, we were shooting past Santa Barbara when I noticed the needle hovered dangerously close to E, and I took the next off ramp that held the promise of petrol.

Here, in Santa Barbara, amid sunshine and sand and rolling hills of red and white mansions and people that look like they just stepped out of a soap opera and prices that indicate that this is the vacationland for those who already live in the normal vacationland, I'm finally reassured that we made it out of Mexico intact. I resume exhalations at the normal human rate, and some of my muscles unclench.

Still, I see no reason to dally, and Milac, though interested in the unnaturally perfect faces that mill throughout these palm-infested neighborhoods, raises no protest to moving farther away from the border. So we cruise along up the coast, listening to the waves crashing against the rocks and beaches, feeling the wind, and soaking in the cinematic blueness of the visible atmosphere. Then the road turns inland, and the water disappears, and even when it splits in two and we take the westerly branch heading down highway one, we're still landlocked. Within minutes we find ourselves surrounded by agriculture.

These fields sprout no white clouds of puffy cotton, no tall stalks of hearty corn, no trees with hanging yellow-orange fruit, not even amber waves of golden grain, but rather tiny green plants spread out in neat rows headed to the mountains on the right and the ocean on the left. And in these bundles of inconspicuous green leaves, little red dots

swell up and out of the dirt. We pass at least a mile of them before I recognize them for what they are.

“Strawberry fields,” I say, when it strikes me.

“Nothing is real,” Milac replies, “and nothing to get hung about.”¹⁸⁷

“What?”

“Never mind.”

We zoom past millions of these ripening red berries, their acid sweetness compounding by the second, and I slowly come to realize just how hungry I am. We haven’t eaten much of anything in just over forty-eight hours. I’m on the verge of jumping into one of the fields and scrounging around, stuffing my face with dripping crimson pulp when we see a farm stand, and decide to purchase sustenance instead of stealing.

The hours that follow take us through even more fields, through fertile valleys and nondescript cities, and then they bring us back to the coast. The shoreline is getting higher, the stretches between beaches longer, the rocky outcroppings more common, and the water seems to grow darker, cooler, altogether less inviting.

As highway one pulls us past Morro Bay and Cambria and other old fishing towns turned tourist traps, we drive along the edge of giant grassy meadow just north of San Simeon where nothing but a few head of cattle seems to exist for miles. Then, in the distance, semi-shrouded in mist, partially hidden by trees and the contours of the land, the outline of what might be a Mediterranean village appears. A mile closer and it becomes

¹⁸⁷ Why would you bother to record a reference you don’t understand? You mystify me.

obvious that, no, it's all too close together and far too tall to be a village, but its architecture holds more styles than could possibly exist in one building. But another mile in and the conclusion seems unavoidable. That structure, whatever it is, shows more faces than a Hindu god, even from a very great distance.

When we finally come to the entrance to the grounds for this monumental edifice, we can still only see a little bit of it, but there's a sign pointing towards it, giving it several names, "Enchanted Hill" among them, and offering guided tours for small fees. This sign is currently being repainted, and a large man of Samoan decent in white overalls brushes the borders while we read it. Milac steps out of the car, and I turn the engine off and listen. He introduces himself to the painter and sucks every piece of information out of him in a matter of minutes. The guy's name is Mailli¹⁸⁸ Randolph. He's worked here for fourteen months. He's got one dog and one kid, so far. He's not sure which he likes better. He's happy with his life, although a little more money and a bit more food couldn't hurt, now could it? Then Milac asks about the place.

"So whose building is that over there?"

The painter laughs. "That's the famous man's. The newspaper man's. The big guy. You know him. The man who made his fortune selling other people's stories. The man who had to make up the news before he told everybody what it was. The guy who bought ink by the barrel, and sold it however he pleased. When he got bored or got frustrated with a world that needed so much manipulation, he up and built a whole world to his liking, so he could just live in that."

Milac pauses to read the sign again. "Where is this guy who built it?"

¹⁸⁸ You can make almost any name sound Samoan by spelling it backwards.

“Him? Today? Oh, he dead.” The painter says this almost reverently. “Been dead almost half a century.¹⁸⁹ Keeled over about a week after it finished construction.” He stops painting and looks at the house in the distance. “Must have been a nice seven days, though.”

We keep driving.

¹⁸⁹ Are you trying to create a parallel to Stalin? I’ve heard worse ideas, but I wouldn’t advise it...

S.F.

“So what is it, precisely, that you want, Milac?” I ask him this as we cruise along more beautiful coastline, heading further up to where the land comes to a point.

“Right now? A whiskey sour.”

“You know what I mean. What do you want from this trip? What are you looking for?”

“The same thing as you.” He doesn’t look at me.

“But I don’t know what I want. I thought I did once. I thought I did twice, actually... and each time my goal seemed to elude my grasp.” I don’t really want to talk about me,¹⁹⁰ so I turn it around again. “But I haven’t been able to figure you out at all. Sometimes, I think you’re not even trying. And then I realize that I don’t even know what I expect you to be trying to accomplish.”

“I’m searching.”

“For what?”

“A person. A place. A thing. A noun. A verb. An occupation. A pastime. A belief. Anything. Anything at all that will make me happy. I don’t know what it is, but when I find it, I’ll recognize it, and I know it’s got to be out there somewhere.”

The city on the bay is murder on a stick.¹⁹¹ A manual transmission, especial an old manual transmission like mine, especially on an old heavy car like mine, does not

¹⁹⁰ Are you just now realizing this about yourself?

¹⁹¹ Murder on a stick – sounds like a product you buy at the ballgame in Oakland.

handle stop and go traffic on steep inclines gracefully. The clutch and the brake both take an incredible pounding while we inch up and down the almost vertical streets that grace the city of the Golden Gate. These hills provide breathtaking views of the ocean, of the bay, of the city itself and of the verdant mountains that lie in the distance, but I'm too busy fighting gravity with friction and internal combustion to appreciate the vistas being offered. The scenery can't seem to lure me away from my efforts to not let my fender roll back into the grill of the Mercedes behind me.

I do, however, notice what Rosinante also notices – that as we drive from section to section of the city, over a hill here and a ridge there, down to the water or through the park, the weather seems to change dramatically every two or three blocks. From sun to rain to fog to sun, from a humid seventies to a bitter fifties to a balmy eighties – entirely different patterns of temperature and participation, all within a couple hundred yards of one another. The confluence of the California heat, the Pacific jet stream, the tidal influence of the bay, and the odd pockmarks and contours of the valleys and jagged topography that make up the physical geography of the city result in a goulash of meteorological conditions so jumbled and confused that I have to adjust the windshield wipers, the air conditioning and my accommodations for differing road surface conditions more frequently than I signal to turn.¹⁹²

When we eventually find a parking spot near the top of one of the hills, I finally notice, as I look out on the surrounding areas, that these distinct microclimates we've been driving through make up just one element of the spectacular arrangement of micro-cities that bundle together, that pile up, that stand quite literally on top of one another in

¹⁹² Describe the weather. Check.

order to form a San Franciscan whole. Steel skyscrapers running into brick warehouses piled next to endless rows of pastel Victorians of every imaginable shade stacked up beside ultra-modernist housing developments that let out into tightly packed pockets of the seedy urban typical grime and blight only to bounce back on the next hill, the next block, to find perfectly restored Nuevo-Mission style homes. As far as the eye can see – which, thanks to the varying elevations, is rather far – these alternate cityscapes rumble into one another, interspersed with parks, with avenues, with museums and libraries, monuments and universities, and all cordoned in and squeezed neatly together by the all-encompassing old waterfront.¹⁹³

And as we walk and take cable cars and streetcars and ride electric buses and light rail through these beautiful cross-sections of a hundred different metropolises, it becomes perfectly clear that the population displays a still greater diversity than the architecture. The suit-clad manipulators of money by the million mix with the hand-me-down homeless that camp on their doorsteps. The techno-wizards of start-up central in high-priced casual-wear, with their gadgets and caffeine and hyper-connectivity, sit side-by-side in the coffee shops with tea-sipping, tie-dye sporting hippies so thoroughly dropped out that they don't realize the Summer of Love is more than three decades gone. And the painted ladies are more than just houses, for the old women who live here still go out in style. And the gays are the lifeblood, the energy of the place, ever-present, ever-vocal, ever-adding to the scene. And the Asians show up more than in any other city with the Chinese and Japanese and Korean and Thai, Indian and Laotian and Vietnamese, Tibetan, Manchurian and Pakistani, Cambodian and Malay and sons of the Philippines. Although

¹⁹³ Describe the architecture and topography. Check.

the Russians and Mexicans and Caribbean islanders all compete for the honors of the major minority. And everyone – everyone – thinks he or she is an artist in this expensive and self-styled modern land of the bohemian.¹⁹⁴

And this lie shines so alluring to those of us who know that we're not.

One day and two nights of exploring these wonders and Milac starts to talk as though he doesn't want to leave. I can't say that I blame him, as I was thinking the same thing myself, but something in the air worries me, though I couldn't say what it is.

Looking for some breakfast, we walk into what looks like a classic retro diner from the outside, but once we sit down, we realize that it is actually an ultra-hip combination diner/art gallery/performing arts venue. A table-tent next to the napkin dispenser tells us that the current show of paintings is by an artist who specializes exclusively in portraying scenes from diners. A few of the pictures that hang on the wall look as though they might have been painted here also. No theatrical numbers are scheduled to be performed in the central open space this morning, according to the daily specials menu insert, but our waiter – a thin, forty-ish man named Maurice Robbegrillet¹⁹⁵ in an apron, a Hawaiian shirt and a Roman collar – does offer to bring us our food via a plot-free, image-oriented interpretive dance. We gratefully decline.

¹⁹⁴ Describe the people. Check.

You've got all your white bread travelogue requirements down, assessing the place in some mundane fashion. Now you'll try to undermine that with an outlandish incident or character of some kind. I'd like to say you're not predictable, Michael, but... well, facts.

¹⁹⁵ Do some people call him a space cowboy? Or do they simply recognize him as the father of the *nouveau roman* antinovel? Your next line seems to insist the latter.

Milac orders scrambled eggs and a chardonnay. I ask for a waffle with a side of bacon and a beer. When we get our drinks, we begin to talk in earnest.

“There’s no guarantee I’d be happy here,” Milac says, “but I can’t see why I wouldn’t.”

“This town does seem to have a bit of everything.”

“But only a bit,” he makes a point of this, “nothing excessive, just available.”

“That is nice.”

“It’s better than nice. It’s fucking delightful.”

“But is this sort of delight what you’ve been looking for?”

Milac pauses. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. But if there’s one place I’ve seen so far that looks promising for me to dig deeper, to mine down, to search still farther for that mother load of sparkling significance, this is it.”

“So what does that mean for the trip?”

“This city is where I should stay.”

As he says this, our waiter places our meals in front of us gracefully. Maurice looks at us briefly and then sits down in the booth next to Milac.

“I know this is going to sound frightfully rude,” the waiter says through a sympathetic frown, “but I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation, and I’d hate for you to get your hopes up because I’m sorry, but unn-uhh, it ain’t gonna happen.”

“I beg your pardon?” I ask.

“You’d never get the permits.”

“What permits?” Milac asks.

“The permits to live within the city limits of San Francisco. You don’t think they let just anyone in, do you?” Maurice shrugs.

“You need a permit to live in this city?”

“For any period longer than two weeks, yes.”

“What? Why?” I can’t believe this.

“Because this city is so small,” Maurice explains, “but so wonderful. I mean, we’re on the tiny tip of a peninsula here and there’s only so much land. We can only accommodate so many people, so we had to do something to limit our numbers. We tried just raising the prices of everything, but within a couple years it got to the point that only investment bankers, venture capitalists and corporate lawyers could afford to live here, and that is not the sort of mix that makes for an interesting interpersonal milieu.”

“So now you need a permit?”

“Yes. The city board of supervisors developed a system of living-permits that allows for future immigration while keeping current lifestyle standards and preserving the exceptional diversity that makes this city so incredibly unique and indescribably entertaining.”

“So how does one get a permit?” Milac asks.

“Well, there’s a three stage application process wherein the applicant for residence must prove their serious and heartfelt longing to be a member of the greater San Franciscan community, must prove that there’s a societal role not currently being sufficiently met in the city that you can provide—”

“But I saw homeless people downtown yesterday,” I add, “what’s their role?”

“Duh. The system allows for exactly one thousand homeless/panhandler/destitute junkie permits, but there’s a seven year wait list to get one of those.”

“Go on,” Milac insists, “what’s the third requirement for a standard permit?”

“That’s the hardest one. It’s the standard that nixes ninety-nine percent of all applicants.” Maurice shakes his head melodramatically before continuing. “One must prove that their permanent presence in the city will create a net increase in the splendorous rainbow of human multiplicities that is the city’s population.”

“So you need to be different.”

“Not just different. Everyone here is different. There’s a sorrowful glut of difference, almost a pitiful conformity of expected difference, so when someone applies who is *merely* different, he might as well just flush the forms down the crapper. In order to get in, you need to be exceptionally different, amazingly different, astonishingly, dumbfoundingly, stupefyingly different.”

Milac thinks about this for a moment, then says, “I’m the literary heir to an unknown nation; the sole possessor of unique culture, language and customs; a seasoned world-traveler; a renowned poet, essayist, and novelist; an irrepressible wit; a drinker of mighty volumes; an appreciator of fine art; a polyglot intellectual; a polysexual sadist and exhibitionist; a liberal anti-Marxist neo-fascist environmentalist Whig; and one hell of a fuck, if you don’t mind me saying. Will that get me in?”

“Are you kidding?” Maurice looks a little disgusted. “The dissatisfied, world-weary, over-educated, wish-I-was-Nabokov, hyper-sexualized émigré shtick might have worked thirty years ago, but we’ve got like an entire neighborhood of you guys now.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ This is funny because it’s true. It’s also incredibly sad. I need a new act.

“Then tell me, Maurice,” I’m genuinely curious, “how did you get your permit?”

“First off, I’m a Jesuit.” He points to his collar. “I’m an active, ordained Jesuit who works as a waiter. A gay, Jesuit waiter with a superb sense of style and a really incredible singing voice, but that never would have been enough without my condition.”

“What condition?”

“I’m an apathetic hedonist. I enjoy neither stuff nor things, yet I do believe that enjoyment of such is the chief aim of my life.”

That’s when we notice that the Rosinante sits waiting for us in the parking spot directly outside the door.

We ask for the check,¹⁹⁷ and we just keep driving.

¹⁹⁷ You forgot to mention that I tried to seduce the waiter at that point, and although he seemed interested, he didn’t really care...

W.C.

“Are you crazy?” Michael asks, for the twenty-first time in as many minutes. “We need to go back. I could have been a king in San Francisco. They would have let me in, given me a permit, put me on a pedestal, probably bowed down and worshipped me.” This youngster can be pretty annoying when he desires to be, although I must confess that I do see his point. “In the land of ubiquitous diversity, my complete unexceptionalness would be the most bizarre phenomenon they’d ever seen. I’m so vanilla, I’d completely blow their minds. They’ve probably been searching for people as boring as me, probably been recruiting them for years.”

“We’re not going back, Michael.” On this topic, I have to put down my decisive and incontrovertible foot. We’ve barely made it over the Golden Gate Bridge, onto the Marin headlands, and already I’m not sure where we’re headed. Navigation is not my forte, but I seized Rosinante’s reigns in order to free us from that Babylon of poseurs, pretenders and pseudo-pendants. Fortune smiled her blessings on me such that I was able to find my way out of that labyrinth of candy-striped gutters and trolley-car peaks, but the hideous orange bridge served as an orienting beacon, and now that we’re beyond it, I’m beyond my realm of volitional intent.

“Fine. Just go straight, you jackass.” Michael appears as sullen as he is crass. “Realm of volitional intent? What’s that even supposed to mean?”

I refuse to dignify this last outburst with a response, but I experience an acute confusion as he seems to have been commenting on private thoughts of mine that I haven’t said aloud.

“So, Michael, where do you intend that we should go next?”

“Take a right when you get to highway sixteen.”

“And to what wondrous adventure do we head, might I ask?”

“Don’t worry, old man, you’ll like it.” What a prick.

As we head farther inland the earth grows drier, the hills less rugged, the fields more pronounced. Then the fields start rolling, and these undulating patches of earth sprout lines, perfectly straight, crisscrossing them in every direction, forming the tidy rows of carefully controlled growth that only arise in regions of highly cultivated vineyards.

“Are we to sample the fruit of the vine, perchance?” I ask.

“On the nose, Milac. I knew you’d figure it out.”

“And at what temple of enology shall we go to worship?”

“Take your pick. Take a couple dozen picks. There’s a few hundred vineyards in the area and most of them offer tastings. The only real choice we have to make is which valley to go up. Sonoma doesn’t have quite as many vineyards, but they’re a bit friendlier and they don’t charge so much. Napa has a vineyard every seven feet, but they’re all a bit hoity-toity and they’ll happily demand the soul of your firstborn male child in exchange for half a glass of passable cabernet sauvignon.”

“And which do you recommend?”

“Since the drinks are still on Milton, let’s hit Napa.”

The next several hours take us through the fertile rows upon rows upon rows of green and yellow and red and purple and orange and blue and black and white and every corresponding flavor of grape that the human race has bread, hybridized or stumbled upon in quantities worth considering.

On either side of the Napa River the luscious vines creep their way over their sturdy supports that stretch back into the surrounding hills, disappearing into folds of the land and past the remaining clumps of uncultivable forest, and guarding over these pervasive strings of juicy berries stand the central houses, the faux-chateaus, the agricultural and vinological brainstems turned wine shops, turned gift shops, turned tourist trap, turned peddlers of high-priced crystal and higher-priced booze. And as Michael and I pinball-bounce from one vineyard's storefront to the next, we find more commonalities than differentiations. Every vineyard has a parking lot – a full parking lot, but not completely full, there's always room for a few more guests. Every vineyard has a crowd, a bustling herd of eager tasters, of sophisticated would-be-sommeliers, of the elderly bored who've been told that this is something worth doing, of the wealthy middle-aged who feel that this is their due, of the giddy youth just-legal and already worldly who want to get drunk without the sharp pain of liquor. And to preside over these masses, every vineyard employs an officious staff of pourers, explainers, describers, cajolers who sell you the thimble to get the case in your trunk, equipped with the every-present credit card reader that presses its warm plastic slit against both sides of your pass-key, your electromagnetic signature, your indebted promissory, your link to a world of everyday toil, and opens up the cellars to consumption and collection.

And every single vineyard, every single winery, every single place that I stop the car and we put our feet down onto the ground has at least one exceptionally good vintage for sale. And I try to resist, but Rosinante has room and the card a high limit, so each time we walk in we walk out with a bottle, a case, a cask if they'd let me, until we've gone up one side of the river and half way back down the other and the tender feet of fermented glucose have pitter-pattered our tongues and our lungs and our cortexes cerebral into swerve-time driving with a weighted car of valuable cargo. Then, when I take just one tiny wrong turn and we seem to have headed up an old tractor path, Michael insists that we step out of the car.

"Tell you what, Milac," he slurs as he speaks, "I'll take back the keys and get us back to safe ground."

"I'm fantastical," I mutter, indignant.

"All the same, man, this valley is cashed. We should ditch nappy Napa while the sun still shines and head over that mountain into Sonoma and see if we can't hit just a couple more fun factories before they all call it quits por la noche."

"Sounds good. Where do I head?"

"Straight to shotgun. It's a complicated route. Only one little road heads over that ridge and I'll be lucky to find it myself. Hand over them keys. No time to be wasting."

Grudgingly, I give them over and slide in the seat on the other side. He guns on the engine and flies out of the tractor trail, onto a side street and corners into another. This brings us up into the ridge of the woods and rock, and in the occasional tree break, we can see the whole valley below. The winding road switches back and forward as it

rises, pulling my cochlea and pushing my stomach. It doesn't stay pavement, but turns into gravel and stone and dirt and closely worn underbrush, and it narrows as it spins around a lone mountain peak that I hadn't seen earlier, before suddenly heading down a very different road. As it begins to descend, I notice that the valley into which we head seems to be nothing but a gulch, a narrow crack diving down almost inside the mountain, with no trees, no grass, just jagged, colorless rocks covered with misaligned rows of withered vines baking in the dying sun.

Then the road turns sharply and dead ends into a stone structure that seems to be hewn directly out of the mountainside, no visible seams separating it from the rock that surrounds it.

"I must have missed the right turnoff somewhere back there," Mike says. "But since we've found another vineyard, we might as well try it out."

"I don't like the looks of this place."

"Don't be such a pussy."

So we get out the car and head into the windowless building, the stone doors rasping against the stone floor as we open them. The inside is lit solely with candles, although, other than that and the burrow tunneling into the back wall, it looks just like every other winery we've seen today. The walls hold bottles of wine, cheese, crackers, sauces and wine-related foods. The tables are littered with homey crafts and wine accessories. And the left wall sports a tasting bar, behind which a man stands waiting for us, his eyes fixed upon us from the second we stepped in the door. His gaze draws us instantly to him until we stand across from the gaunt, emaciated man in academic black robes, and without a word of pleasantries, he begins his spiel.

“My name is Mallarmé Rappaccini. I am head vintner and enologist here. Wherever there has been civilization, there has been wine. It brings joy, it kills bacteria, it preserves food, it prevents disease, and it unleashes passion. Mankind has pursued this craft for well over seven thousand years, but I am the only one to have perfected it. There is only one kind of wine on offer here today: a blood red merlot. It gives you strength beyond your forethought and luck past every doom.” He pauses, one might think, for dramatic effect. “But there is a substantial tasting fee.”

Michael pulls out the shiny golden credit card.

“No,” Mallarmé responds, “the charge entails slightly more than what one of those can offer.”

“What do you mean?” I demand, offended as always, whenever my credit is suspect.

“A sip of this wine will cost you whatever you hold most dear in this world.”

Michael starts at this. “You can’t have my car. I need it.”

“It’s not I who decides what your payment shall be, so drink, just drink, and let your heart declare the cost that you will endure.”

A noise closely akin to a sneeze escapes from Michael’s mouth, and then the stifled laughter bursts forth, uncontrolled until he has to hold himself up on the bar. “I’m sorry, but oooooooooooooo, my heart shall declare... a dollar seventy-five.”

Mr. Rappaccini says nothing to this, but pours two glasses carefully before us. Michael raises his glass and tosses it back without a second thought. My glass remains on the polished stone bar.

The merchant turns to me. “Will you not take of this wine, Mr. Rasselas?”

“It’s really pretty decent,” Michael adds. “Nothing special. But it’s already been poured, and the price is um, let me see, how about... nothing.”

I lift the glass slowly and smell the heavy earthy bouquet. I put the glass to my lips and tilt the angle such that a drop rolls over and onto my tongue, and instantly the bitter acrid flavor washes over my senses and I spit the remainder onto the floor. The salty sourness burns in my mouth as I watch Mallarmé shake his head and Michael continue laughing.

I run out the door, my knees weak beneath me, and take shelter in the Rosinante. I immediately grab Michael’s notebook, my single source of stability, and write down these words as best I can, as the world seems to spin about me. As I write I feel solemn and inexplicably urgent, as though this might be my own will that I sit here composing, my final words. I wish they were better.

After what feels like ages, Michael follows me out to the car, still chuckling.

We press forward in our driving endeavor.

N.O.C.A.

I'm in no condition to drive at this point, but Milac's so sloshed that he looks like he's going to have a hard time breathing, so I stay behind the wheel and hope I don't kill anybody besides myself. Somehow I manage to backtrack all the way to Trinity Road, and by keeping well under the 20mph speed limit, I get us through the twisting mountain trail this time and down into Sonoma Valley. Of course, by this time all the vineyards have shut down for the day, but we don't really need more alcohol in our blood anyway, and we've got a small fortune in bottles in the car already. I'm a bit worried about the spree that Milac went on back in Napa, but maybe Milton doesn't have anyone keeping track of exactly what gets spent where and when, and come to think of it, Milton's exactly the kind of guy who might just drop a few thousand in the wine country himself and not even remember the trip.

I'm not sure where we're headed, so I just keep going north since I can't get any navigational suggestions out of Milac. I can't get a single word out of the guy.

I guess Milac was pretty freaked out by that last place we stopped. I admit it was a bit eerie, but the Goth-spook vibe was just so over the top that you couldn't really take it seriously. At least, I couldn't. I've stopped trying to predict what's going to get to Milac anymore. Sometimes it feels like I totally understand him, but other times he might as well be a complete stranger. Like right now, he sits over there on the other side of the car, his head resting against the glass, his face getting pale, and he won't hold a simple conversation. We're back on highways now, so it's not like I need to concentrate or something.

I know he's drunk and all, but come on, talk to the driver. It's just common courtesy.

We stop for dinner at a random pizza joint in some town called Garberville. It's getting pretty late, so I'm happy to find anything that's open. The food isn't bad and the kids running the place act nice and laid back and ask if my friend is okay. Milac doesn't say anything, just sits in the booth and gazes blankly at the pizza. He could use to eat something. He looks like he won't have the strength to make it back out to the car. I tell the waitress that, yeah, he's fine, "Just had a bit too much to drink earlier in the day."

Milac passes out entirely just a few minutes after we get back in the car, and I look over at him, almost fondly, and think, that a boy, Milac, just sleep it off.

For some reason, I've got it stuck in my head that we should try to make it to Crescent City tonight. I'm pretty much sobered up from this afternoon, but I'm still rather tired and it's not like we're in a hurry, but by the time I figure all this out, I'm fifty miles past the last town I saw that might have had a hotel. Maybe I'm not that sober.

Then I have another brilliant idea and decide to take a shortcut through the redwood forest that I vaguely remember shaving a couple dozen miles off the smoother highway route. Of course, this shortcut isn't quite as direct as I thought it was, and it might have been a different exit from a different road in a different state in a different part of the country, but I press ahead anyway into the lush valleys and subtle mountains and massive giant trees that turn into solid walls of wood that virtually line the road, until we do what we always do – we get lost.

As the realization sets in that I can't even tell which direction I'm headed, much less what it would look like if I weren't lost, I decide to stop for the night on the side of road.

I wake to a disturbingly silent midmorning twilight. My watch says it's ten in the morning, but the gentle light on my eye says just before dawn. I look out and up through the windshield and see the cause of my confusion – the mammoth trees on either side of me rise up to heights that block out the sun, and only the faintest dim illuminates the ground even when the sun stands directly overhead. A dull ache still haunts my brain from yesterday's drinking, but the fascination of midday darkness captures my attention.

"Jesus, Milac, would you at this?"

He doesn't respond, so I shake him to wake him up.

Nothing.

I shake harder. "Milac, wake up."

Nothing. Not even breathing.

"Holy shit. Milac Rasselas, you disgusting fucking bastard, wake the fuck up!"

Still nothing. Oh, shit.

I get out of the car. Now I'm really freaked out. He's not asleep. He's not in a coma. He's fucking dead. He's fucking gone. Done. Over. Out. He was annoying. He was inconsiderate. He was egotistical. He could be a real prick. He smelled bad. He picked fights. He thought well of himself and little of others. But he was human. He was somebody. He was a companion. He was another voice that would talk and an ear that would listen in an otherwise indifferent world. He was a friend.

He was my friend.

The only one I had left.

Oh, shit. This hurts.

Now Milac is a lump of flesh growing cold in the cab of my car, and I'm lost in the middle of a quasi-mythical woodland with a quarter tank of gas, no idea where I am, a trunk full of wine, and a dead foreign poet riding shotgun. It takes me half an hour, but what choice do I have? I get back in Rosinante and start her up. I turn around and try to backtrack to the highway, but the farther I go in any direction, the deeper into the arboreal darkness I seem to descend, and the paler Milac's corpse grows beside me. The situation would be edging me ever closer to panic if it weren't for the overwhelming despair that multiplies in me each time I look over and see his yellowing skin.

I don't notice as the road gets narrower. I don't notice when the dark gets almost pitch black. I don't even notice when the gas gauge creeps damn close to empty. I'm too preoccupied with the loss of Milac, trying to figure out what it means, why did it happen, and – oddly enough – how much I'll miss him. However, I do notice the truck on the side of the road. I slam on the brake and Milac lurches forward before the seatbelt catches him. There's no one in the pickup's cab, but I jump out anyway and begin looking around and yelling for help.

"Dude, you okay?" The voice comes from a small fat man in a muumuu and Birkenstocks standing behind the nearest tree. I'm so startled by his closeness and the oddity of his appearance that I can't respond for a moment. "Dude?"

"No, I'm not okay." I start to ramble. "I'm lost and Milac's gone and I need directions and we need to get to a hospital or something. Can you help me?"

“Who’s your friend in the car, man?” he accuses as he asks. “He’s not a cop, man, is he? Oh shit, man, are you a cop? I knew this would happen.”

“No. I’m not a cop. He’s not a cop. He’s just a friend. But when I woke up this morning, he was dead.”

“Oh. How’s he doing now?”

“What?”

“Still dead?”

“Yes!”

“Well, do you want him back living again?”

“That’s a pretty messed up joke.”

“I’m serious, dude. Some people don’t. It’s a totally fair question. And it’s a definite possibility too. There are plants hereabouts that can take away the sting of death, but they also steal away its mercy. So it’s something of a tradeoff, but it’s not beyond the realm of modern holistic science.”

“Yes. Sure. Of course, I want him back, but how do you propose to do that?”

“Give me five minutes.”

With that, he waddles a few feet away to where the monstrous husk of a fallen redwood lays on its side, nearly fourteen feet wide. He releases a lever and a hidden door swings open, revealing a hint of a spacious interior. A few seconds later, he reemerges, with a mortar and pestle, pounding lord-only-knows-what into a pungent and aromatic pulp. He trundles over to the car, climbs in on top of Milac and forces most of the paste into the corpse’s stiff mouth, some up his nose, and then massages the mixture into the throat and down the neck. Then he jumps out and brings the rest to me.

“You should have some, too,” he says.

“What is it? What does it do? Why isn’t it working on Milac?”

“It’s life. What doesn’t it do? I’ve got one minute and forty-three seconds left.”

I take a finger-full of the mixture and put it into my mouth, and although the taste nearly makes me gag, the stimulation is instant and inconceivable, like a snort of cocaine, caffeine, taurine, amphetamine, heroin, adrenaline, and pop-rocks all at once, forcing an irrational and profound sense of harmonious well-being and intelligence upon me, an emotion that only reasserts itself when I see Milac begin to cough and shake. He flails a bit and spits out as much of the paste as he can. He rips the chunks of it out from his nostrils and pulls in a deep, full breath. The next five minutes he spends spitting and breathing and nothing else, while I stand speechless and happy, and the little man in the muumuu watches both of us contentedly.

“What the fuck was that?” are Milac’s first words.

“Milac, you’re back!” are mine in response.

“Back? I’m back? Where did I go?”

It takes a while to explain to Milac that he was dead. It takes even longer to convince him.¹⁹⁸ But a second taste of that herbal paste goes a long way in that direction, and a tour of the little man’s hidden log-lair seals the deal. Our rotund savior goes by the name of Midgard Reynard,¹⁹⁹ he’s lived alone in these woods for decades and counting,

¹⁹⁸ I remember none of this, and with good cause, believe even less. A three day gap exists in my memory from the time I passed out after tasting overly academic Symbolist’s wine to when we first get into the state of Washington. I imagine I had a toxic reaction and you somehow nursed me to health.

¹⁹⁹ I certainly don’t think a super genius hippie, named after the Norse abode of man and a medieval French fox, resurrected me from the dead. Your lies grow strange, Michael.

and his abode holds endless wonders botanical and ethereal. From food to shelter to mold-based water purification and ample lighting thank to luminescent caterpillars, the forest floor provides his every need and chemical emotion with minimally invasive tending. He tells us that his first innovation was a hybrid of psychotropic mushrooms and marijuana so that he could get his THC without excessive heat or light, and avoid the infrared sensors of the government helicopters. “And as a plus,” he says, “the shit also takes up some ridiculous visuals.”

“But that’s not possible,” I say. “One’s a fungus, the other’s a plant. They have completely different structural, reproductive, and anatomical systems. They’re not even in the same genealogical Kingdom.”

Milac looks at me, incredulous with my incredulity, for obvious reasons.

“Dude,” Midgard replies, “there’s not much point in trying to tell Mother Rhea what she can and cannot do, because as soon as you got your *rules* all nice and firm in your head, the natural world will just up and kick you in the mental nuts. The bitch don’t care what you say she can’t do. If she wanna do it, she’s gonna do it.” Mr. Reynard pulls a rip from a nearby bong and his eyes seem to twinkle. “And I’m mighty glad she did.”

“And are you happy here, Midgard?” Milac asks.

“I think so,” he says. “Sometimes it gets lonely. But most of the time, dude, I really can’t tell. And that’s good enough for me.”

We ask how we can possibly thank him, but Midgard refuses all reward, except a case of wine that he takes out a sense of being polite. He packs a special pound bag of psilocybin-kind for us, swears us to secrecy, and then points us on our way back to civilization, so that we can just keep on driving.

It's been forty-eight hours in Seattle and we're already running out of things to do. This problem presses down harder on us, looms larger in our minds, for certain obvious reasons of limited further geographic defaults. Milac has made it perfectly clear that he doesn't want to see more mountains or wilderness for their own sake. He openly mocks the very idea of setting foot in Canada, and I refuse to get on any more boats, so that rules out Alaska. But we've gone as far north and west as any reasonable mock-epic quest could reasonably demand, so the mutual fear that seems to hover unmentioned in the subtexts of all our conversations is that we will soon be confronted with the Alexandrian prospect of weeping for there will be no more lands to conquer.

Of course, old A the G, sort of ignored three-fourths of all the continents that he knew about in his "no more lands" estimation, so perhaps we can be forgiven for turning a blind eye to the Midwest for a moment.

The container ships hold a fascination over Milac that I just don't understand.²⁰⁰ He can spend a whole overcast afternoon just watching the giant cranes pull those freight car boxes on and off those floating warehouses. I think it might be something about potential for him, something in the unknown value of massive quantities arriving all the time that sucks him in. Those boats carry more than most cities could hold, and the process is so automated that it only takes a couple men to load, sail, and unload them entirely. I don't know why this captivates his imagination, but it does.

²⁰⁰ When you've lost something important, your eyes will always involuntarily return to the last place you saw it.

And it's a good thing that he's found something that will amuse him because this city is nearly exhausted. We've seen the sights, we've drank the coffee, we've listened to the music, we've appreciated the art, the scenery, and all the eclectic neighborhoods. We've shopped the fresh air markets and fed the Fremont Troll and even ridden to the top of the ultra-phallic Space Needle. So now we sit at the very café-laden, grunge-rock-loving, hipster heavy, waterlogged end of the country that I know and love, and as we watch mechanical arms tightly stack metal caskets²⁰¹ of durable valuables onto a vessel bound for ports unknown – Milac with a far-off, wistful look in his eyes – we try to see where we're headed.

“Have I seen America?” Milac almost whispers. “What more is there to experience? What essence remains to distill? What vitality have you neglected to show me? What have I missed?”

I strain to think. My poor brain comes up with nothing. I know that I'm selling everyone short here, that there's something so obvious, something important, but I'm drawing a blank, so I turn to Milac, and that's when I see it – it's edge poking up into the skyline above the piers, calling to me, telling me what a sap I've been, accusing me of not even being a real American for not thinking of this sooner – the local major league shrine to the national pastime: Safeco Field.

“Baseball,” I say.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Look, more irony.

²⁰² This better not be an *Untouchables* reference.

I try to explain the significance of this sport to the overall national psyche as we walk up to the ticket window. “Every kid in the entire country is raised being told that they’re supposed to love baseball. Growing up, if you’re a good American prepubescent male, you love baseball, Mom, and apple pie, in that order.” It’s a harder task than I thought it would be.

“Did you love baseball?”

“No. I thought it was boring. I didn’t care much for apple pie either.”

“I won’t ask about Mom.”

“Thank you,” I say, “but my personal psychosis and traumas aside, this really is a definitive trait. Childhood baseball experience is almost invaluable. Being forced into associations you have no interest in, gaining a prolific command of useless statistics, and developing a tolerance for insidiously long, utterly pointless events – these are skills that every adult American male must possess, and if you don’t have them, or if the process of developing them does not instill in you a love for the game, or at least for one specific team, then you can never become a fully functioning member of American masculine society.”

“You still think it’s boring, don’t you?”

“No,” I say, “not so long as you drink enough beer.”

Once inside the stadium, we immediately get beers and then pause a moment to take in our surroundings. The home of the Seattle Mariners is one of the new breed of ballparks that maximize capacity and visibility and profitability, that turn the fans into an audience and the players into performers, that have retractable roofs and virtual reality

arcade games, that look as much like modern art as they do actual structures, and that reaffirm the public's trust in the sagacious wisdom that says that nothing is more wholesome or old-fashioned American than catching a baseball game at the new old ballpark.

"Seriously, this sport is how a lot of little kids learn to play, interact and relate to one another, and on certain levels, this is what they model their dreams and aspirations on." I tell him all this as we manage to find our seats.

"Round ball. Round bat. Hardest thing in sports?"

"Yeah, something like that."

And today we happen to walk into not just any game, but a historical event. So the electronic scoreboard and the speakers and program and the back of the ticket tell us. Today's game is the very last game of a legendary player in the game of baseball. At the age of forty-nine, leftfielder Micawber Rime, is the oldest player in major league baseball, and he's been with the Mariner organization longer than any other person ever has. He's never really been a star on the team or in the league, but he's a predictable performer and something of a good luck charm for the team. Just looking at him has always reassured his teammates, his fans, his friends. If he can make it at his age, then so can everyone else, the general thought goes. And he is affable and well mannered, and

combined with his gangly, tremendous height, his longevity earned him the endearing nickname of Albatross.²⁰³

And this favorite Mariner is well loved throughout the Pacific Northwest, yet the last few years have not been easy on Mr. Rime physically, with multiple injuries on his ancient bones requiring multiple surgeries and extensive rehabilitation.

“Who is this guy?” Milac asks.

“He’s something of a hero.”

“For what? Being old?”

“For sticking with it, even when it was tough, even when it was awful, for putting up with all the shit and seeing it through. That’s something that a lot of people admire. They look up to that.”

“I see.”

But today is his swansong, his last chance at bat. His knees have gone cripple and he’s hanging it up. One more day on his feet is all that they’ve promised him. Tomorrow he has more surgery scheduled. More pain and more frustration. Maybe he’ll walk again. At least for a little while, until he needs more. Or maybe he won’t. But he’ll never play ball again. That much is sure.

Or maybe they’ll discover something else in him that’s bad.

Something he already feels.

²⁰³ What, you didn’t think the events were dramatic enough as they were? You had to throw on these painfully obvious references. You had to literally make him the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, and then conflate that with the Dickensian optimist.

Something he doesn't like.

Something they haven't named for him, but that he's convinced of himself.

Or maybe he just doesn't like the idea of not playing.

Micawber Rime, in his crisp Mariners uniform, hobbles out to the mound where a microphone's been set up for a short pre-game farewell address.

"The man's practically on crutches," Milac says, "how is he going to play a game?"

"They'll probably just put him in for a single at bat. This isn't the most important game of the season, and it'll just be a courtesy, giving him one last hurrah."

"So they're giving him a pity fuck?" Milac asks.

"You might say that."

"There's nothing wrong with a pity fuck."

The crowd cheers Rime enthusiastically as he makes his way slowly to the microphone stand, and when he reaches it, they quiet nearly instantly in reverent respect and awe. He pauses for a moment, overcome with emotion, and tries to collect his thoughts before he speaks. The crowd waits patiently.

They are attentive.

They are listening.

They want to know what Rime will have to say after all these years.

For that matter, so do I.

Milac suspects the guy might be milking this a bit.²⁰⁴

Without a word, Rime takes an unsteady step back from the microphone, and a murmur of confusion runs through the stands. He then pulls something out of the back of his pants and places the end of it in his mouth. I can't tell what it is from our seats, but then I look up at the JumboTron and see that it's a small caliber pistol. I look up just before the sharp crack reverberates through the stadium, amplified and distorted by the squeal and feedback of the speakers.

Rime drops to the dirt, gun still in hand, hat still on, and the crowd breaks into screams. The attendant paramedics run out onto the field, but what the hell are they going to do? Some of the fans start to rush for the gate, as though this suicide thing might just be contagious. More people, especially the little kids, start openly crying. The vast majority of us just stare, unbelieving, not knowing how to react to this.

Milac is immediately much more upset than I am.

"What the fuck?" he yells. "Is this what it comes down to? Is this all there is?"²⁰⁵

"No," I say, trying to figure something out myself, "this is just the fringe, the edge, the far flung oddities of geographic, psychological, and metaphysical borderlines. There's a different America. We've just been skirting around it, looping and circling, seeing it from angles and peripheries and distant mutated side-effects. There's a level

²⁰⁴ Suspect nothing. He was milking it. In the worst of all possible ways.

²⁰⁵ I wasn't so much upset as I was disgusted. Your own emotions colored your reading of my emotional reaction. This happens almost all the time.

and sane and real America²⁰⁶ and I'll get you there. I promise that. Even if you have to be the first one to see it.”

So we turn the corner, we head back east, we aim for the heartland and the vast open spaces. I hope we get there. I really hope we do.

We just keep driving.

²⁰⁶ Here you vow to create a nation, one that doesn't exist, one that has never existed, one that couldn't every possibly exist at any point in the future. Why not just create a world? Why not just write a novel?

Your foolishness knows no bounds...

VII

“I have not adorned this work with fine phrases, with swelling, pompous words, or with any of those blandishments or external ornaments with which many set forth and decorate their matter. For I have chosen either that nothing at all should bring it honor or that the variety of its material and the gravity of its subject matter alone should make it welcome.”

– Niccolò Machiavelli, Preface to *The Prince*²⁰⁷

“... the second is almost infinitely richer. (More ambiguous, his detractors will say, but ambiguity is richness.)”

– Jorge Luis Borges, *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*

“Blah, blah, blah, and furthermore, blah.”

– Somebody Marginally Famous, A Book People Quote to Look Smarter Than They Are²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ On the irony front, this is the best thing in your entire notebook...

²⁰⁸ ... and this is the worst.

We head east into the darkening night, through mountains and deserts and Washington strangeness, and I wonder how I can possibly make good on my promise. Navigationally speaking, I can point us the direction, but ontologically speaking, I'm not even sure that our end goal exists.

By the time we get to the Idaho state line, it's the dead of night and I'm in danger of falling asleep at the wheel. This is always a poor idea, but particularly so when driving through the Rocky Mountains.

So I turn into the first town that I see from the road and the extent of the accommodations consists of a gas station and a saloon, so Milac and I take advantage of both. We have to, actually, because there's no one manning the till at the gas station, so we head across the street to see about paying and to see if there might be a place to crash for the night.

The saloon has a dirt floor and rough-cut timber tables. The benches stand empty, but the place looks well used. A scraggily man stands behind the bar who takes our gas money and then tells us to get going. Milac inquires as to sleeping possibilities, and the man shakes his head.

"It's not safe around here with the customers we got. Hell, it's okay with me if you sleep right here. Take a nap on the bar for all that I care. But soon enough there'll be characters in here – they come in every night – and you best not be here if you don't want their trouble."

“But we just want to sleep,” Milac insists, “and maybe have a drink.”

“I’m telling you, it’s trouble. They’re always looking for fights. And even if you keep away from pissing them off yourself, the two camps always end up fighting one another, and you know you’ll get pulled into the brawl.”

“Maybe we should listen to him, Milac, the whack job groups that live up on the mountaintops around here can be pretty bad news.”

“But who are these beasts that we need to so fear them?” Milac asks.

The bartender hesitates. “Evil men. Twisted, brutish, godless folks that respect no authority and spit at decent morality.”

“Survivalists?” I guess.

“No.”

“Martial arts cults?”

“Hardly.”

“Hell’s Angels?”

“Nowhere near.”

“Post-apocalyptic mutant Satan worshippers?”

“Sort of.”

“White supremacist neo-Nazis?”

“Worse.”

“Jehovah’s Witnesses?”

“Close, but the brutal truth of the matter is that these bastards are far more deranged, far more ruthless, far more anti-social, nihilistic, reactionary, dangerous and all around nasty than any of those folks.”

“Okay, all right already,” Milac says, “you’ve built them up plenty. Just tell us who, or should I say what, these fiends are.”

“The awful truth is that they’re rival camps of literary novelists.”

“Good god,” I ask, “how is this place still standing?”

“They’ve actually burnt it down seven times in the last three years. Fortunately, those nutso writers tend to drink a lot, so I can afford to rebuild every time.”

Just then the front door slams open, and in walks a grizzly man, covered in bloody furs, near ten feet tall with neatly combed hair, a sharply tied tie, and dainty reading glasses. An entourage of a dozen or so similarly clad, though more humanly sized, followers follow him in and sit at his table. The barkeep immediately begins filling pitchers of beer and bringing them over, but when he gets just a few over to the table, the big man accosts him and the voice freezes him still.

“You talking about me again?”

“No, sir, Mr. Rasa. Of course not.”

“Why not?” the giant demands. “I need the buzz!”

“Of course, right away, sir.”

The bartender then steps back over to us and begins to explain in his most respectful tone.

“That over there is Mjollnir Rasa²⁰⁹ and his literary salon. They’re all leading avant-garde writers who realize that the true goal of all language is to hammer out

²⁰⁹ I understand inventing the rival camps of novelists – it’s certainly more interesting than the drunken hicks we actually saw – or at least equivalent. However, naming one after Thor’s hammer and the Sanskrit work for aesthetic flavor seems a bit much.

phrases in such a way as to fashion stunning images of such startling beauty and pure aesthetic flavor that the words become indelibly seared into the reader's consciousness. They've denounced the decadent foolishness of such pedestrian pursuits as that of character, plot, or psychological realism."

Milac rolls his eyes at this and sticks his tongue in his cheek repeatedly in the universal sign for calling someone a blowjob. A look of terror creeps into the bartender's eyes when he sees this cavalier reaction, but he keeps up his well-rehearsed speech.

"You should really read all their works, especially Mjollnir's, because they are indisputably literary geniuses of the highest order, and even if you don't enjoy their works, you'll be smarter and a better person just for reading them. And I have copies for sale in back. Would you care to look at some?"

A low-pitched growl comes from the table, and then Mjollnir Rasa screams out loud, "Say the rest of it, you filthy bastard!"

The bartender is shaking, but he manages to get it out. "Oh yeah, and if anyone asks, Mjollnir Rasa and his friends are all really humble and down to earth and not at all pretentious and have completely normal and healthy relationships with their mothers, and I've also heard that they all have really big dicks."

"That's better," Mr. Rasa breathes much easier now.

A few of the big guy's fur-clad associates make their way over to where we're standing by the bar, and I'm afraid they're about to try to pressure us into buying their books when suddenly the door slams open once again and in walks a muscle-bound brick of a human, five feet wide by five feet tall, dressed in fatigues, with a sophisticated pipe hanging from his lips and a tumbler of Scotch already in his hand. Twelve recruits,

similarly equipped, march behind him in formation and fall into position at the bar with him.

The bartender jumps back behind the bar and starts filling whiskeys as quickly as he can.

The smoking human brick clears his throat loudly to get the proprietor's attention. "Pardon me," he asks, pointing at Milac and me, "but why have you neglected to introduce my literary troupes to your new friends?"

"Um..."

"My name is Metonymy Radha,"²¹⁰ he says, shaking my hand and my shoulder at once, "and although I'm sure my reputation precedes me, I will tell you that I'm the foremost literary talent, craftsman, and theorist in all of Idaho—"

"If not the country," a henchman of his chimes in.

"If not the world," adds another.

"And I don't mind admitting that the key to my success, my overwhelming fictional power, my... some might go so far as to say... genius—"

"Absolutely genius."

"Genius at the very least!"

"—is my grasp of the concept of perceptual emotional verisimilitude and its central role in any sort of marginally artistically viable novel. You see, dialogue, plot, thematic coherence, character development, and forceful imagery," on this Mr. Radha tosses a disdainful sneer towards the crowd at the table, "that's all a bunch of useless

²¹⁰ This is even worse, Michael. Why would a man be named after a figure of speech and the Hindu goddess that in the bhakti movement of Vaishnavism symbolizes the human soul?

poppycock. The only method worth a damn for producing prose that is worth a damn to read is to attempt to portray actual elements, to recreate states of the human soul in a lingual form recognizable on paper. It's the only useful method."

Then the tall man in firs yells out, "Useful for putting your readers to sleep!"

"What would you know about readers, Rasa? You don't have any."

"You haven't got any balls *or* any readers, Radha!"

As might be imagined, this screaming match quickly devolves into the exact sort that can be found in any lively junior high lunchroom cafeteria, every member of both parties yelling, and a good deal of beer and whiskey being thrown. Milac claims he even hears a genuine "I know you are, but what am I?" but I suspect he may be exaggerating just a bit.

Milac and I crawl behind the bar to seek shelter from the alcoholic food fight, and we find the bartender there, huddled under an umbrella.

"Is it always like this?" I ask.

"Oh, no," he replies. "Usually it's much worse. But the night is still young. And I think they were both trying to act all mature and sophisticated to try to make a good impression on the potential readership."

"Potential readership?"

"You two."

"Oh."

"Still, they take a while to get warmed up. When the real fight comes, you'll probably see at least one person get killed."

Milac looks rather irritated by this. “If they hate each other so much. If they disagree so thoroughly. If they can’t stand one another’s presence, why do they keep coming back to the same place? Why don’t they just move to another mountaintop, find another bar?”

The bartender is shocked and a little hurt at this idea. “That’s the worse thing that could happen to either one of these bands. They need one another to denounce one another. The need rivals, motivation, fuel to burn. And if they didn’t have their enemies reading their books so that they could berate them, then these poor fellas wouldn’t have any audience at all.”

Suddenly, a loud crash rings out as a beer glass is shattered over somebody’s face. The noise of bickering comes to a complete halt, and instead of being replaced by the chaos of brawl, a legion of pens can be heard scurrying across lined paper.

As we peak over the edge of the bar, we see that every last one of them, even the man whose face was bloodied, has his notebook out jotting down vital recollections.²¹¹

“You two got lucky,” the bartender says. “There must be some sort of grant application deadline looming. They’re usually not nearly this productive.”

²¹¹ Although it’s often thought to be a sign of maturity to be able to mock oneself or even to let others mock you, it also stands as obvious evidence that there is a lack of significance that asks to be mocked. You might be better served by working on that inadequacy than simply pointing it out...

MT-WY

Montana doesn't try to be anything that it's not. Montana, to the best of my perception, doesn't try to be anything at all. Montana just is, and there's a lesson in that somewhere, if someone clever enough were to come along and find it and pick it out and dust it off and say, hey, here, look at this lesson I found. I hope someone tries that some day. I wish that someone luck. But it's not the sort of project that I'm interested in myself.

Montana is the first place I see cattle actually being herded by a man on a horse. The cows are being herded across the road in front of me thanks to some two-hundred year old open-range laws here, so I'm a little annoyed at the delay, but mostly I'm just delighted to see a cowboy, an honest to goodness cowboy, sans string-tie, sans fancy boots, sans goddamn fucking slide-guitar. He's an old, fat cowboy on an old, fat horse, wearing old, fat blue jeans and a work shirt and cowboy hat that was never intended to be any kind of fashion accessory.

"Look, Milac," I point like a first grader, "a real live cowboy."

Milac looks up from the nap he was taking.

"If he's a cowboy, tell him to tuck in his shirt."²¹²

The mountainous ranges of western Montana hold little charm in Milac's eyes. . Still, there's one more classic Rockies stop that the poor man absolutely must endure.

²¹² I didn't say this.

“What stinks?” he asks, as we step out of the Rosinante in the parking lot closest to Old Faithful.

“You’ll see,” I say.

And sure enough, right on time, according to sign, the geyser sprays a solid column of superheated steam and water and stench into the sky. Milac is suitably impressed and only mildly disgusted, but his first question is simple – what is it?

“A geyser.”

“Which is what? A built up pressure pocket from an underground river?”

“No. I think the pressure come from heat.”

“And... where does the heat come from?”²¹³ Milac’s breathing grows measured and paced as we walk over to the explanatory diagram that details how the energy source for all these shows is the molten hot magma that rests beneath a thin layer of crust. It goes on to show, in brightly colored illustrations, that the entire park is one giant volcanic plateau floating upon a massive lake of fiery lava, surrounded by a semi-dormant geothermic hot-spots that stretches over half the state, one of the largest known like it to man.

Milac starts to shake slightly.

“Are you okay, Milac?”

“Get me the fuck out of here?”

“You want to leave the park?”

“The state! The region! Get me away from the goddamn lava!”

²¹³ At this point I’d grown impatient with our wanderings and wanted to get to heart of the Midwest, so I decided to push us forward more quickly, and I fed you the rest of the Grand Canyon story in a fashion most dramatic, if not overly so.

“What the heck are you talking about?”

“The fire in the ground!” He’s running back to the car. “We’ve got to get away!”

I hurry to follow him and get Rosinante rolling, heading out towards the east gate of the park. Milac twitches visibly, constantly looking behind us, sweat rolling down his face, as we swerve through the twisting, mountainous roads.

“Can’t you go any faster?” he asks.

“Not without crashing. Now would you mind telling me what the hell is wrong with you?”

Milac tries to get his breathing under control. Then he looks at me. He thinks for a long time before deciding what to say. Then it finally comes out.

“It was two years ago, and I was returning to my homeland from a long and arduous trek to parts unknown. And as I was just coming over the final ridge of the mountain trail that led back to Nacirema, I watched in horror as the valley floor that held up the entire nation cracked into seven jagged pieces and crumbled swiftly into the magma below. The whole process took less than thirty minutes. I watched in abject helplessness as all three hundred and forty-three residents plummeted to their doom in a lake of molten rock.”

“There were only three hundred and forty-three people in all of Nacirema?”

“They were my people! They were my friends! They were my family!”

“Yes. I’m sorry. That’s awful... I just thought your home country would have been a bit bigger than that.”²¹⁴

“It was my entire fucking nation! In a matter of minutes, they were all dead!”

²¹⁴ You insensitive fuck. I still can’t believe that you believed what I was telling you, yet you still pointed this out in the middle of my panic. Were you trying to fuck with me?

“Calm down, Milac. I’m sorry. I didn’t know. But it’s not going to happen again. The entire state of Wyoming is not going to just plunge into the earth.”

“How do you know?”

“No cataclysms like that have happened in this area in hundreds of years.”

“DO YOU HAVE ANY FUCKING IDEA HOW MANY THOUSANDS OF YEARS NACIREMA EXISTED BEFORE IT DISAPPEARED BEFORE MY FUCKING EYES?”²¹⁵

“Good point.” I step on the gas.

“Why do you think I came to America in the first place?”

I shrug. “To find and either write or live the American story?”

“I’m not looking for a fucking story!” He’s still yelling, but there are tears pouring out of his eyes. “I’m just looking for a home.”²¹⁶

He tries as best he can to calm himself, but he’s still hyperventilating, still fight-or-flight-ing, still feeling fear and horror and regret in his veins. But he looks at me with concern.

“I lost everything, Michael. And everyone.” I know that pain that I hear in his voice. “I have nothing left on earth but myself, thanks to a sudden geothermal anomaly, so you’ll forgive me if I’m a bit edgy about places where the earth seems anxious to reclaim still more down into its maw.”

Fair enough, I think. I don’t say it, but I think it.

²¹⁵ Okay, I can admit it. I was overly dramatic.

²¹⁶ I always speak the truth, even when I lie. Especially when I lie.

I drive due east as fast as I can and I try not to stop for the sake of Milac's mental stability, but Rosinante can only go so far on fumes, and we have to stop in Cody, Wyoming to refill the old girl's gullet.

Just minutes in this town let us know that they carry on the promotional and entertainment endeavors of their namesake, Buffalo Bill Cody. Every business in town, even the gas stations are cowboy themed. We see a dozen signs for their nightly rodeo before we can get to the pump. There's even a giant Cadillac with steer horns on the hood and speakers on the roof roaming the streets reminding everyone to attend what it proclaims to be the rootenest, tootenest, something or other in the West.

As I fill up the tank, Milac deliberates over whether or not to use the can. He clearly has to piss, but he doesn't want to leave the conditional safety of the car's mobility. Eventually, nature and the sound of liquid gas streaming into the fuel tank win and he heads inside at a mad dash pace.

At the same time that Cadillac pulls up to the pump next to ours, and a large young man – about my age, but a good foot taller – in expensive leather and a sparkling clean cowboy hat steps out and begins to jabber about how Cody is the rodeo capital of the world. Now I understand that promoting this particular nightly event is this man's job, his livelihood, and probably his passion, but the jackass just won't shut up about it. I try to ignore him and dismiss him with head nods, but he comes on over and introduces himself and tries to sell me advance tickets to the rodeo.

"I am the one and only Matteo Rodomotade, and if you are wise enough to show up at the show tonight – and I can cut you a deal on admissions because we're friends –

then you will get to see some of the finest roping and riding ever performed in the world of rodeo courtesy of yours truly.”

I just shake my head as politely as possible as slide back into the driver’s seat to wait for Milac.

But when old Mr. Rasselas strides quickly back towards the car, Matteo makes the tragic error of grabbing a hold of his arm to try to sell him on the rodeo. In one fluid motion, Milac slams the palm of his hand into the bridge of the big man’s nose, and leaves him kneeling on the pavement as he slides into the car.

“Drive, goddamnit.”

I’m starting to get a little scared of Milac.

But, then again, I’m also sort of starting to grudgingly respect him.²¹⁷

²¹⁷ It’s about goddamn time...

W.D.

It takes almost nine more hours to get there, but entering the state of South Dakota brings a strange sense of calm and safety to Milac. We've left the real mountains far behind, and whatever topography lies ahead of us can safely be deemed mere hills.

Thoroughly non-volcanic hills.

And even those will soon grow rare.

So he finally lets us stop for the night.

In the morning, the panic of yesterday is forgotten.

Now nothing compels us forward but our own personal searches for meaning.

Without pressing fears or immediate demands, we cruise along the highways rather aimlessly. Our thoughts roam as freely as the smooth, unbroken sky.

We've reached them now, the great Great Plains, all unadorned and level, so the sweeping grasslands and the boundless wheat fields offer little suggestion to thoughts or emotions.

Instead, we're left with our interior topographies to explore – our mountains of doubt, our impassable rivers of regret, our fathomless canyons of loss.²¹⁸

And as we progress through this wide, open emptiness, the only breaks from our task – the only external attempts to render this void significant – come every couple miles in the form of hand-painted advertisements that dot the roadside with promises:

²¹⁸ Great. Now you've made your allegory entirely explicit. So much for subtle.

Free Ice Water!

at

WALL DRUG!

Bored?

Try

WALL DRUG!

Seen it all?

Not until

WALL DRUG!

Have You Dug

WALL DRUG?

Kids Love

*WALL DRUG!*²¹⁹

²¹⁹ What kid doesn't love drugs?

When we arrive at the town of Wall, South Dakota, there is little choice but to stop and look at the infamous drugstore. I've been here before, but this is the first time it matters. This place started out decades ago as nothing but the sole drugstore in a nowhere-nothing town, a quotidian business with diminishing prospects. But just by repeatedly labeling it differently, by creating a unique expectation, by reassigning a meaning to that which previously held none,²²⁰ the druggist was able to capture the interest of millions of travelers who would otherwise not care. He sold them – he sold us – on stopping here, and their spare nickels, their eyes, and their idle curiosity have built Wall Drug into a tourist mall of kitsch, of camp, of fiberglass jackalopes and six foot tall rabbits on wheels, of miniature Mount Rushmore photo opportunities with a sign that says, "Please do not climb on faces."

Yes, it's a drugstore. Yes, there is free ice water.

But language, decision, and the arbitrary designation of value have built it into a giant business, a local economic engine, a fond memory for weary travelers, and a piece of people's lives.

We walk through the t-shirts and novelty items and unrepentant garbage that are offered for purchase in this roadside institution. I gaze all around me at the bustling crowds that would otherwise not exist. "This is the promise of America, Milac."

He thumbs through some bumper stickers, but he doesn't respond.

"I mean it, Milac. You can make anything out of nothing."

²²⁰ The linkage between the emptiness-grandeur of the tourist trap and the artificial nature of human purpose-meaning couldn't be more in the reader's face here. Tone it down. Or better yet, let me take over...

IA

What Michael has yet to figure out is that there is another option.

You can make nothing out of nothing too.

Perhaps his ignorance is for the best.

I wish I didn't know this fact so well.

We cross the Big Sioux River, another meaningless distinction, another random designation, another cut in the earth where water accumulates in quantities large enough to assume a direction, and suddenly we're in a place called Iowa.

There is corn in Iowa.

There is lots of corn in Iowa.

There are fields and rows and stalks and ears and even individual kernels of corn in Iowa.

At times, it feels like I remember all of them.

It takes more than seven hours to cross this state.

Michael doesn't understand why I want to stop in Dubuque, Iowa, on the eastern edge of the state. He doesn't know why I insist on driving to the outskirts of this town, to a particular street that doesn't appear on any maps. He couldn't tell you why we sit in front of the house where a boy named Maxwell Ragnarök lived. He couldn't tell you about the smooth skin, the blond hair, the muscular thighs, the nature so sweet that he swore he would follow me anywhere and tried to. He couldn't tell you about a lot of things.

I could.

But I won't.

Michael certainly doesn't understand why we spend half an hour staring at the Mississippi waterfront that now plays host to a crowd of riverboat casinos, the waterfront that used to build ships so many years ago, the waterfront where we hopped on one that was headed for the sea, for anywhere, for everywhere.

I don't think young Mr. Redmond would understand if I told him.

I'm not sure if he could.

There's a virtually unlimited supply of corn in Iowa.

(Now, who is fucking with whom, my good man?)

But I suppose he'll have to figure out something soon.

Milton's credit card got rejected at the last truck stop.

C.H.I.

Milac needs to see Chicago.

Chicago, Chicago, your shoulders aren't so broad anymore. You shining Midwestern lakeside demigod of commerce and industry. No longer the hog butcher to the world you once were. You still buy and sell that pig all over the globe, but now you've figured out a way to keep your hands clean in the process. With commodity markets and futures exchanges and options on sale for the currency fluctuations, you gutted that swine with a pen and paper, an open call chorus, bought on margin, at peril. You hung up your overalls, dropped the sledgehammer, the cleaver exchanged for favorable terms. An Armani, a contract, a modem, a bid-floor. Why deal with the whole pig when there's so much profit to be made just dealing in the risk?²²¹

This is something Milac needs to see. That everything we've passed, everything we've seen growing, every cow and pig and cornstalk and soybean, and even anything we've seen made – it's all up for sale, for bid, for trade, to see what it will bring, to see who wants it, to see who can sell, who can get the others to buy into it all. And the goods themselves aren't the only things for sale. There is gold for sale and silver for sale and currencies from all over the world for sale. But it doesn't even end there. For all these product have their own set of derivative products – futures and options, all for sale.

Slick Chicago. Town of merchants. Town of salesmen. Town that will help you most readily see just what price this whole thing will cost you. Town of truly expert

²²¹ But who eats risk? Oh, wait, that's right, we all do.

pricers. The value? Well, yeah, there's that old saw. But the value is yet to be determined.

In through the suburbs and down the old lakefront, he's seen the skyline, the water, the museums and the parks, but the bizarre depression that's kept him nearly silent since Wyoming still holds its sway over his demeanor. Aside from that one little town in Iowa, he hasn't expressed an interest in much of anything at all. But I know that he'll snap out of it when he sees the Chicago Board of Trade. When he sees the pits, when he hears the roar of the free-call exchange, when he recognizes that the transfers of goods happening in fractions of seconds dwarf the largest cargo ships by several orders of magnitude – that will peak his interest. The potential for metaphor in such a context is just too rich for a man like him to not get excited.

Of course, parking downtown in the Loop is ridiculous, so we stow Rosinante all the way out by Old Saint Patrick's Church and hoof it towards the city's center. We're almost halfway there when I see a face that I hadn't really expected to ever see again. We're walking down Jackson, on the bridge over the river that stretches the block between Union Station and the Sears Tower, and the surroundings are so different that it takes me a good few seconds of staring to recognize her. But the long straight hair, the jeans, the tight t-shirt, and the incredibly beautiful smile – those are all the same. No monstrous textbook cradled in her arms this time, but her expression of confidence, even in the big city street, remains.

"Minnie!" I call out, a few feet past her.

She turns around, and it obviously takes her a moment to pull me out of the databanks too.

“Mike Redmond,” she says as she gives me a hug, “it’s good to see you.”

“Minerva Roark,” I reply, dumbfounded, “you’re a long way from Flagstaff.”

“Today is tomorrow.” She shrugs. “Could be anywhere in the world.”

“You remember Milac?” I try to be polite.

She grins and waves. He just nods.

“So, what?” I ask. “Did you just jump on that train, move up to Chicago?”

“I got a fulltime engineering gig in Toronto. I’m on my way there... but I couldn’t pass up the chance to see the big guy.” She points to the Sears Tower, rising above us. “Where you headed?”

“I’m not sure, probably New York, although that gets less likely every day... say, would you like to get a cup of coffee or a drink or something?”

“I’d love to, Mike,” she says, and I believe her, “but my train leaves Union Station in exactly fourteen minutes.” She takes out a pen and writes down the name of her company and hands it to me. “Tell you what, though. If you’re ever in Toronto, look me up.”

I take the piece of paper, and she gives me another hug. I can’t tell you how much the warmth of her body against mine means to me for just that moment. I fold the paper carefully and put it in my pocket as I watch her stride across the rest of the bridge’s span and disappear into the crowd.

Inside the concrete neo-gothic exterior, the four story lobby of the Chicago Board of Trade is a testament to the wealth that the institution herein creates. It is an involved architectural tapestry of marble, brass, glass and platinum. It is almost as ornate as the foyer to Milton Rederijkerskamer's apartment building.

But the real jewels on display in this building are the trading floors themselves. From elevated galleys, the public is allowed to watch the intricate bedlam that swirls in the pits below. The commodities and futures floor is a medley of tiered indentations dedicated to various palpable goods. Swarms of traders scream and signal, their rainbow of jackets displaying who they sell for, and sometimes why. The trading arena (not really a floor) for financial options forms a giant U shape like two sets of bleachers with a view of one another. Beneath elaborate digital displays of market fluctuations and overseas news, the traders exchange bets, pure bets, about what will happen to various currencies. And at every turn, another market seems to pop up, and in each of these dens of frantic activity, the people are busy constructing possibility.

The tour guide leading us through this maze of late-era capitalist wonder is an obese but highly energetic retiree in a suit and tie, who introduces himself as Merdle Richter.

"I worked in this building for thirty five years, and I loved it so much, I still come back once a week to tell other people about it for free!"

His enthusiasm edges quickly to scary, but he certainly offers a real font of information.

“Now, I only worked as an actual floor trader for seven years, but in that time, I had two ulcers and lost forty-two percent of the hearing in my left ear.”

He gives us as much personal information on this tour as he does information about the exchange itself, but you can tell after a while that he doesn’t make that sort of distinction between a professional institution that has an impersonal and disinterested role to play in society and the vocational home that he’s been a part of for almost all of his adult life.

He also seems to think that everyone will be as fascinated by it as he is.

You can feel his excitement, but it doesn’t quite make sense.

“Futures allow investors who deal in commodities, such as agricultural products, foreign currencies, and precious metals, to lock in the terms of transactions that will be made at a later date, thereby minimizing the risk of price changes.” Merdle’s eyes seem to glow as he tells us all this. “Options on futures give their owners the right to choose whether to buy or sell futures contracts at a later date at a set price. Options allow investors to purchase the right to buy or sell an asset, such as stock or a commodity, at a specified price by a specified time. Investors use options to protect themselves from financial losses, but speculators,” the way he says *speculators* indicates that he thinks of them as entirely different breed, “who are willing to assume a large amount of risk, also trade options in hopes that their value will rise.”

When the tour comes to a close, I stand next to Milac and gaze out on the trading floor. As I watch it, the beauty of the activity strikes me.

“Every day, in and out, these people buy and sell pure risk. They engineer transactions such that almost any venture can be a possibility. They spend their days quite literally purchasing the future.”

Milac looks out onto the trading floor and then turns to me.

He’s not impressed. “We all do.”

Just then, Mr. Richter, our tour guide, walks over slowly and taps Milac ever so gently on the shoulder.

“Say,” the jolly man says, “this may sound strange, but is your name Mike Rasselas?”

Milac’s face goes completely white.

“Did you grow up in Dubuque?”

Milac slowly nods his head. Now I’m completely confused.

“I knew it!” Merdle lights up with glee. “So did I. We went to high school together. I never forget a face, not even fifty years later! I was the grade below you. Of course, you probably don’t remember me – why would you? But you were big news back in the day in Dubuque. You were like the king of that school. And what a scandal, when you and that kid, what was his name...?”

“Maxwell Ragnarök,” Milac whispers.

“Yeah, Max Ragnarök. When the two of you ran away together! Wow. That was something else. Of course, these days that sort of thing would hardly raise an eyebrow, but back then, in Iowa, well, you two left quite an impression on everyone. That’s for sure.”

Merdle puts his hands on his hips and sighs about ten times, probably expecting Milac to say something. When nothing comes, he just asks.

“So what ever happened to you two? Everyone always wanted to know.”

Milac doesn't say anything.

Honestly, he sort of looks scared.

He looks at me. Then he looks at Merdle.

Then he turns around and heads for the door in silence.

After just a momentary lag, I follow him.

IN - D.T.

Back in the car, we drive.

It's all too confusing. The streets and these stoplights. I get us back onto the highway. I don't know in which direction. I just want to drive fast, but the traffic is slow and heavy.

Eventually, I look over to Milac.

He's still sheet white.

All I have the heart to ask him is, "What?"

That's all it takes.

"I left this country when I was eighteen years old."

He still has his accent. After pretending for forty-nine years, I guess that's how he talks.

"I was young, and we were in love, and we thought that there might be somewhere else in the world where we could be together. That thought didn't last long."

His voice drops.

"Maxwell died in a dock accident in Thailand, crushed under weight of a crate being unloaded, less than two years after we left Dubuque."

He stares out the window. But I can see his tears in the side mirror.

"After that I cut and I burned and I severed all ties with anyone, and I spent the last forty-nine years drifting through the ports and the carnivals and highlights of the lowlifes of the world, lying and duping and coning and fucking my way into whatever

money or goods or ride or food or shelter I could muster, never knowing quiet when I'd be found out next, never really wanting to know where I'd end up next, but always somewhere in the back of my mind, I wondered, I dreamt, I worried about what I had left behind me in America.

“Sure, I found new homes. New languages. New passions and even new loves, but I always ended up losing those too.

“And I never came back to America. I could have, I suppose, but my origins always managed to be off limits to me.

“But in the years that I was away from it, in the years that I denied it because it had denied me, in all that time it grew in my head, and the mythology of America had no stronger believer in its archetypes than me, and even if I didn't know half of whatever the hell I thought it was, it called to me.

“And when you get to a certain age, Michael, you have to listen to those calls, no matter what the risk, no matter how solid a con you've set up in Turkey, no matter how foolish and fleeting and ridiculous the story you wrap yourself up in, you have to take your chance to see America again, even if that chance comes in the form of a stupid, drunken ex-sailor named Milton.”

He pauses for a very a long time, it seems.

“I don't know what it means to you, but these weeks, I think, have been wonderful.”

I don't know what to say to this.

At a truck stop near Gary, Indiana, we stop to get gas and something to eat. Of course, our credit's no good anymore, but for the first time on the trip, Milac seems to have cash.

While he's finishing his dinner, I go to the payphones and make a collect call to Martin Readerly. I don't know what I'm going to say, but there are things I need to know. And with Martin, I never have to worry about driving the conversation.

When he recognizes my voice, the very first words out of his mouth are this:

"It's a cookbook. It's a cookbook!"

"What?"

"The books that Milac told Milton were his Nacireman bestsellers – the books that the professors of Asian literature at the University of Istanbul swore to Milton were masterpieces, lord knows how Milac got their cooperation – the books that we couldn't find anyone to translate anywhere in the Western world – well, Milton found someone who could read them last week in a remote corner of Armenia. Turns out that the language isn't Nacireman at all, but an extinct regional dialect of Turkish-Armenian whose written language combined elements of the Cyrillic and Arabic alphabets, and what we thought was a thick book of laconic poetry was actually a cookbook! The things that were supposed to be his novels were just semi-literal translations of the book of Job and Revelations. Of course, those are a complete wash, but we're thinking of representing the cookbook – Milton tried some of the recipes, and they're fantastic – and the back-story alone should get some interest."

"So, you know that Milac isn't Nacireman?"

“Nacirema! There’s no such thing. It doesn’t exist. Milton even trekked out to the mountain gorge where Milac described this supposed thousand year old civilization, and it was completely barren – just ash and rock. Not a trace of anyone ever having lived there. So unless the mountains just swallowed the nation up whole, it looks like Milac is a total and absolute fraud.”

“Who isn’t?”

“Yeah, but he’s a really ambitious one.” Martin sounds jealous. “And pretty good at it, too.”

“He actually American.”

“Really? When did you discover that?”

“Just today.” My voice almost cracks. “So, listen, I don’t suppose there’s a job waiting for me at Rederijkerskamer Management, is there?”

“Well, you see, the thing about that is that Milton doesn’t trust you.”

“What?”

“He sort of assumes that you and Milac are in cahoots.”

“Why?”

“You two managed to spend an awful lot of his money, and the forty-eight thousand dollars in ATM cash advances was the proverbial final straw.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Hey, I’m not saying you did it. But over the last few weeks, one of you has used Milton’s card to withdraw the maximum amount at a string of spots in states all across the country. He finally noticed and cancelled the damn thing three days ago.”

“That explains a lot. That, and the fact that you don’t like me much anymore.”

“Aww, Mike, come on,” Martin says, sweetly, “I never liked you much.”

“Thanks, Martin.”

“No problem whatsoever.”

It seems that Milac wants to see Detroit, and I don’t know what else to do.

We drive through Michigan in near complete silence.

Neither one of us is talking.

Even Rosinante seems to quiet her purr.

As the highway lets us out into downtown Detroit, I realize right away – I can really almost feel it – that this is the worst. Worse than North Philly. Worse than Baltimore. Worse than Little Haiti. Worse than Louisiana. Worse than Houston. Worse than New Mexico. Worse than Compton. Worse than Tijuana. Worse than Idaho, and even worse than Gary.

Detroit is the worst place in all of America.

The gray, post-industrial wreckage is everywhere.

Everything in this city is broken.

Even if we had a city map, we’d be lost. All the street signs have been stolen.

They abandoned efforts to put up replacements years ago.

The need for civic overhaul is so complete that it begs to be scrapped altogether.

This feels familiar. This feels right.

This does not make it the most beautiful of places.

This makes it the most appropriate.

The signless desolation of decayed urban Detroit parallels my current mental state in ways I've never dreamed.

We find an operating gas station down by the river, and Milac fills up the tank while I look at highway map and think about where we're headed.

Where I'm headed.

That "we" has become a habit.

I don't have anything holding me to Milac.

I don't have anything holding me to anything.

I don't have anything.

Wait.

I have a slip of paper in my back pocket with a name on it.

I have the good graces and hope and charming smile of a very beautiful woman.

I'm about to have a full tank of gas.

And I have a roadmap that says it's three-hundred eighty-one miles to Toronto.

From this gas station I can see the Ambassador Bridge stretching over into Canada, that long lone bridge that could take me to a pristine, ordered, quiet place. I'm in the midst of the most chaotic, dangerous, confusing maze ever constructed since Minos had Daedalus build the Labyrinth, and above me I see the route that can take me on a narrow path to safety, progress, maybe love, even truth.

I can see for myself a future with that stunning Minerva Roark.
I can see a life most enviable, most pleasant, and most stable.
I could be on my way in a matter of minutes.
I could say goodbye right now.
I'd be leaving America, I'd be leaving home, and I'd be leaving something else.
But so what?
What is there in this country that I've found worth keeping?
What chaos, what garbage, what random mutations, what unknown futures, what
mindless creations, what inexplicable freedoms, what wholehearted lies, what elements
of knowledge, what feathers of self?
I don't know where I'm going.

Then Milac gets back into the car, and my mind snaps clear to decision.
I turn the key and head to the highway and ask him, slowly, and sincere as I can,
"Have I ever told you about a wonderful place called Ohio?"
"No," he replies, "but I'm listening."²²²

²²² And then what happened? This is where you end it? Or is it that your notebook finally ran out of room? Your pen out of ink? Your mind out of gibberish? With what have you left me, your loyal companion and sole lonely reader? After all these pages – no lesson, no moral, no radical wisdom or breathtaking revelation. No home. No purpose. No quick path to happiness. Just a picture of yourself drawn through the distorted refractions of your meager circus-mirror talent, and the option, the pitiful option, of your company with me throughout all my future adventures.

You call that a book?

No, Mr. Redmond, it is merely a life.

VITA

Michael Redmond (the author of this thesis, not the narrator of this thesis by the same name) was born in Dixon, Illinois. He grew up outside Chicago, studied philosophy and theater at Princeton, worked many an odd job, and has edited several issues of the *New Delta Review*. He has taught fiction, screenwriting, and rhetoric and composition at Louisiana State University. He hopes that the difference between him and the characters that share his name or initials is clear, but not obvious.